

CASE STUDY II

no title (gold-leaf work created for Turner Prize 2009 exhibition), Richard Wright (2009)

A preliminary examination of issues relating to the future reinstallation of Richard Wright's gold-leaf wall work (created for the Turner Prize 09 exhibition and recently acquired by Tate) offers interesting comparison with approaches towards the maintenance and display of Long's mud works (Fig. 3). While investigation into the transferral of *Waterfall Line* into Tate's permanent collection was instigated more than a decade after its installation, research into the prolonged existence of Wright's work occurred as talks finalising Tate's acquisition were taking place. Consequently, the artist was actively engaged with concepts of temporality and endurance within his practice. As with Long, Wright stressed the unique and site-specific nature of his wall and ceiling installations but the transience of Wright's painted installations is of conceptual relevance. Despite this, the practical realisation of his stance is less clear-cut and potential for reinstallation of certain works—including the currently 'dematerialised' gold-leaf work—exists.

Wright is a Glasgow based artist who was awarded the Turner Prize in the 2009 competition. While he produces works on paper, he is better known for wall, ceiling and floor works created in response to architectural detail and atmosphere. The notion of transience tends to take centre stage in the critique of his works and catalogue entries focus on their ephemeral quality, the artist's intention that the works be painted over at exhibition close. Almost all of the wall, ceiling and floor works created by Wright over the past twenty years have been destroyed. He works with, 'the idea that there would be nothing left' and the mortality of the work is bound to the memories of those who chanced to see them.³⁵ Time as a medium is knowingly employed within Wright's practice and impermanence continues to be a 'key factor'.³⁶ The artist recently stated that, 'people [...] still seem to be surprised after all these years [...] that the work is really not finished until it is removed.'³⁷

As Wright's oeuvre has become more prominent, solutions to the difficulties posed by collecting his painted installations have been sought; namely through preservation of the original material or the potential for reinstallation. Publicly funded commissions for the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) and the Dean Gallery (National Galleries of Scotland) have led to works being created for institution permanent collections. However, even in these cases Wright

35. Richard Wright, interview with the author, 20 December, 2010.

36. Thomas Lawson, "Richard Wright and Thomas Lawson in conversation," in *Richard Wright* (Milton Keynes: Locus, 2000), no pagination.

37. Wright, interview, 2010.

38. Personal communications with Tim Green, Lizzie Carey-Thomas and Sofia Karamani; Sofia Karamani, Assistant Curator (Tate), interview with the author, 19 November, 2010; Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Curator (Tate), telephone interview with the author, 23 November, 2010; Tim Green, Paintings Conservator (Tate), telephone interview with the author, 3 December, 2010.

39. Wright, interview, 2010.

40. Wright, interview, 2010.

41. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate, 2005), 6.

deems the longevity of the work unstable. For him, an object's ongoing existence is dependent on a culture's *need* for its survival. While Wright suspects that his paintings may not be needed in the future, the current desire to collect his work is indicated not only by institutional commissions, but also by the acquisition of works initially produced for temporary exhibition. Institutions acquiring works in such a way include MoMA (New York), the Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach) and more recently Tate.

For the Turner Prize 2009 exhibition, Wright created two wall works; one, a large scale gold-leaf painting, the other a much smaller red wall drawing placed above an opening through which Lucy Skaer's work was seen displayed. Although completion of the works was attained by their removal at the close of exhibition, their physical destruction did not go unchallenged within Tate; personal communication with Tate curators and conservators revealed the conservation department's concern to discuss the possibility of prolonging the physical existence of the work.³⁸ Although, under certain conditions, this might have been accepted by Wright, he acknowledged that the situation would have been 'far from ideal.'³⁹ Great care was taken over the scale and positioning of the work, but the space itself (like the work) was temporary, constructed specifically for the exhibition. Had the option of concealing the work by means of a false wall been followed, subsequent changes to the dimensions of the exhibition space would have altered the spatial context of a work which was, 'absolutely precisely made to fit exactly where it was.'⁴⁰

Discussion of Wright's wall works is most appropriate in the context of the installation artwork. Furthermore, Tate's acquisition of the dematerialised gold-leaf work demands consideration of the reinstallation process, in this case involving complete recreation. While easel paintings can generally be hung in varying contexts independent of architectural setting, 'in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity.'⁴¹ Architectural space (both physical space and atmosphere within) is of essential importance to Wright for whom work and location are equivalent. Appreciation of his wall works demands the physical presence and mobilisation of the spectator. This is not only due to the optical play inherent in the viewing of larger geometric works, but also for the viewer's *happening upon* more subtly placed responses to architectural detail (Figs. 4 and 5). While the scale of the gold-leaf painting created for the Turner Prize exhibition rendered acknowledgement of its presence unavoidable, physical activation of the viewer was provoked by the surface play of light across the reflective gold-leaf.

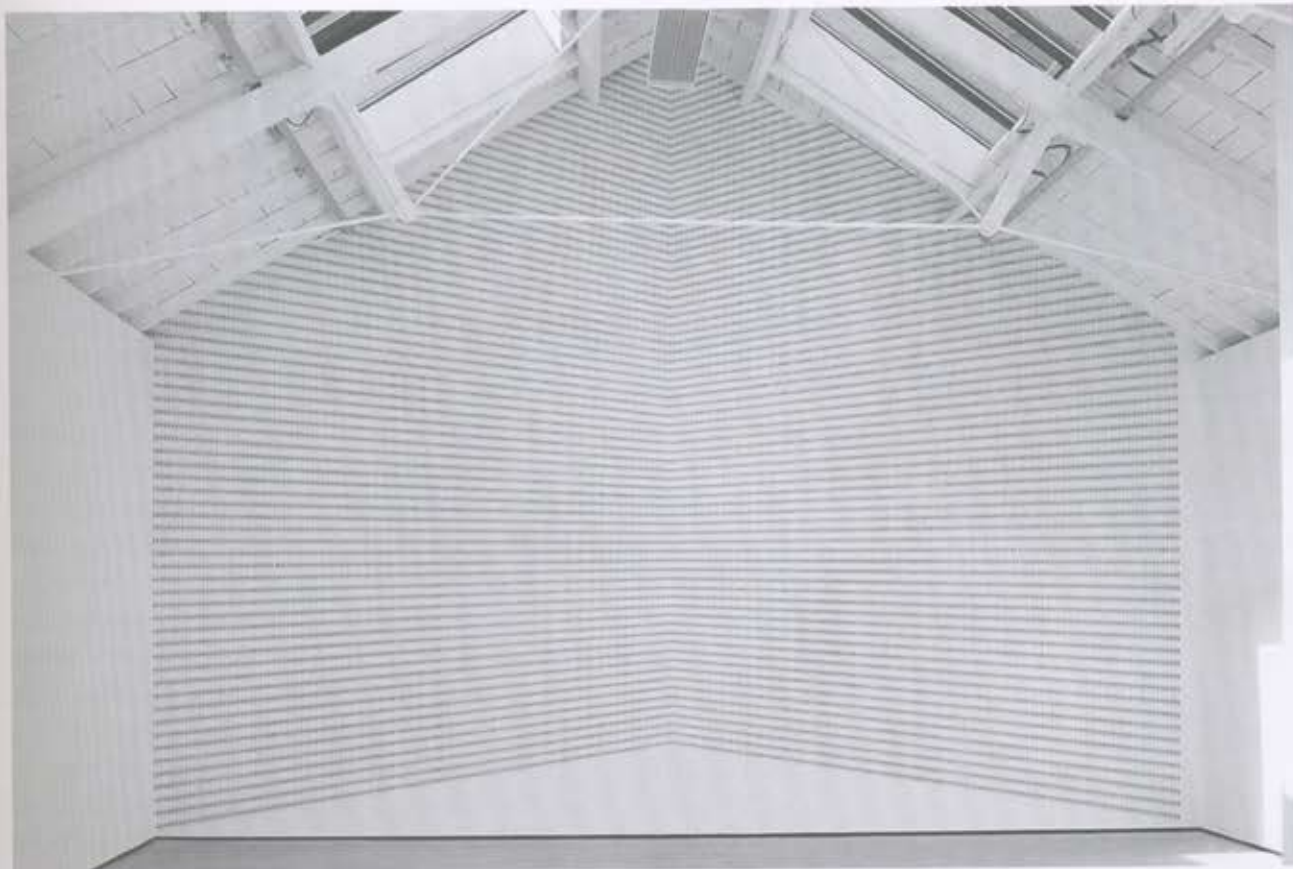


Fig. 4.1 Richard Wright, *no title* (2010), Gouache on wall, Dimensions Variable, Installation view at The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow (2010). Image by Keith Hunter and courtesy of the artist/The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow.

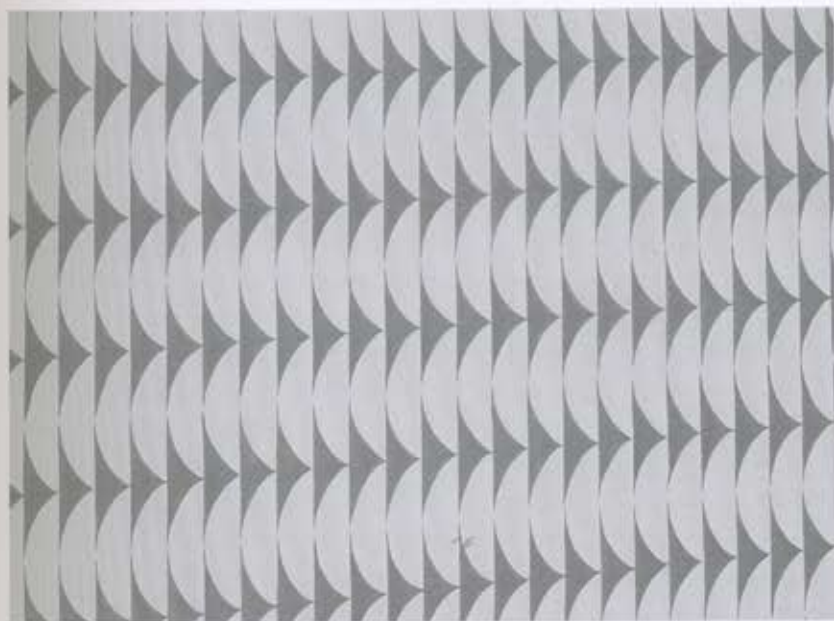


Fig. 4.2 (detail)

42. Karamani, interview, 2010.

43. Adam Szymczyk, "Conversation with Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2002), 57. Wright, interview, 2010.

44. Tina Fiske, "White Walls: Installations, Absence, Iteration and Difference," in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker, eds. (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2009), 232.

45. Karamani, interview, 2010. Wright, interview, 2010. An account of the production process is also given in Sarah Lowndes, "Learned by Heart: the Paintings of Richard Wright," in Russell Ferguson, John Lowden, Sarah Lowndes, *Richard Wright* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 58-60.

As Sofia Karamani, the Tate curator involved with installation, commented, 'I remember giving talks to people in the space and each one of them [...] was] looking at something different to the person next to them.'⁴²

But Wright's painted installations encompass more than the physical space in which they are exhibited. They are temporal events; *performative* works controlled by the live context in which they are created and ultimately destroyed. As such, the tension inherent to the original production process cannot be reproduced. Evolved through the act of making, Wright's installations cannot be thought of as reproducible conceptual pieces in the same vein as works by artists such as Sol LeWitt. Both philosophically and practically, the introduction of difference on reinstallation of Wright's work is unavoidable. Material production of the work is an evolutionary process and the artwork can often be found as much in the devising of a means by which the work can be produced as in the physical embodiment itself. As Wright has previously stated, 'if the work has meaning it is probably precisely located in this relationship between the process and the product.'⁴³ While the default position of describing reinstallations which present notions of difference as *new* works has been questioned, consideration of the autonomy of the reinstalled work is justified in relation to Wright's wall paintings.⁴⁴ Here the universal inability of reinstallation to reproduce original context is more significant. As the gold-leaf work created for the Turner Prize 09 was completed through its destruction, it is here argued that future 'reinstallation' of the work must entail a *new* set of contextual relationships in turn constituting a new live event.

On a practical level, the working process chosen for manufacture of the gold-leaf painting also resists exact reinstallation. Production was extremely labour-intensive, taking Wright and four assistants three weeks of working from nine o'clock in the morning until nine or ten in the evening. In order to communicate how the work should look to his assistants, Wright created a cartoon from a drawing blown up on a photocopier. This was then pricked and pounced to the wall (a process which took five full days). After this initial stage, the form suggested by the chalk marks was reinforced, followed by the application of size and then gold-leaf. Finally, unadhered gold-leaf fragments were removed.⁴⁵

The various stages of production and materials employed expose the artist's intentions for the work's form to highlight the possibility of unforeseen results, which exceed those associated with less complex processes (such as silk-screening or projection) that Wright does not accept as alternatives. In addition, although the cartoon and blown-up



Fig. 5.1 Richard Wright, *no title* (2010). Gouache on wall, Dimensions Variable, Installation view at The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow (2010). Image by Keith Hunter and courtesy of the artist/ The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.

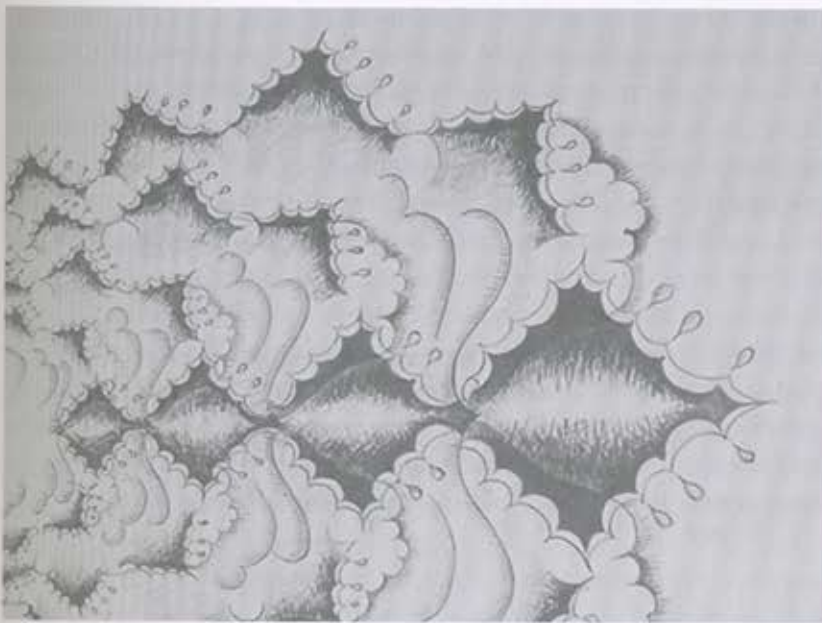


Fig. 5.2 (detail)

46. Wright, interview, 2010.

47. James Coddington, "The Case Against Amnesia," in *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, Michael Angel Corzo, ed. (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 20.

drawings gave the assistants an idea of the work's form, they did not provide a clear edge to paint to. Wright was keen that the drawing should not be reproduced exactly, instructing his assistants that they should do a painting of the drawing rather than produce a copy.⁴⁶ The employment of assistants therefore means that the work's appearance is not only influenced by the technical skill of those involved but also by their personal interpretation of composition. Placement of the work within the exhibition space is another crucial aspect for reinstallation, necessitating consideration of whether a space of particular dimensions must be provided for the work, or—where Wright is present—the work itself should be adjusted in response to architectural space.

In keeping with the majority of Wright's work, the two paintings produced for the Turner Prize 2009 were intended as temporary and painted over at exhibition close. Physical removal brought about the conceptual fulfilment of the works, rendering Tate's subsequent acquisition of the gold-leaf painting questionable. Indeed, while the process of reinstallation offers many works a means of conceptual endurance, it is here argued that any future reinstallation of the work within Tate would be in direct opposition to the preservation of original artistic concept. In 1999, James Coddington (Chief Conservator, MoMA) stated that, 'Respect for [artist] intention is the goal of our efforts, and if such respect requires that we let the work die, we should.'⁴⁷ But the artist-approved revival of the gold-leaf work undermines the conservator's common default to the *original* intention of the artist as well as the art institution's responsibility to the faithful presentation of artistic concepts for present and future generations.

An extended face-to-face interview was conducted with Wright during the course of research. His willingness to discuss the prolonged existence of some works demonstrates an engagement with the theme of (im)permanence within his practice and a more substantial body of information was collected regarding Wright's views than was achieved for Long. This was not only facilitated by the artist's willing participation and interest in this field of research, but also because of the greater topicality of his work during the research timeframe; having recently completed large scale commissions for MIMA and the Dean Gallery as well as winning the Turner Prize 2009. Current temporal proximity to completion of these works enabled more comprehensive information to be gathered from curators and conservators involved, reinforcing the need to fully document works as near to conception as possible.

CONCLUSION

With regard to both *Waterfall Line* and Wright's gold-leaf work, the Tate conservation department was not involved in the original installation and sparse conservation records are held. In both cases, this absence can be explained by a perceived redundancy of labour in the documentation of temporary artworks destined for destruction (through removal) at the end of short-term display. But these case studies indicate the real potential for the lifespan of temporary artworks to be extended indefinitely. Although excluded from initial installation, the conservation department is now responsible for the ongoing care of these works. Clearly this is of particular relevance to *Waterfall Line* where reinstatement is not an option. However, the material preservation of a future reinstatement of Wright's gold-leaf work also cannot be ruled out.

The temporal proximity of contemporary artworks—especially those installed within institutions with established registration protocols such as Tate—offers an invaluable opportunity for the documentation of physical works and artists' preferences for future care. Without this comparative basis, subsequent monitoring is unable to ascertain to what extent the work has changed over time, to understand which aspects have been lost. Although an isolated instance, examination of the treatment of *Waterfall Line* indicates a shortcoming in the Tate artwork registration system for works produced as short-term commissions but with the potential for extended lifespan. Discussions regarding the work's indefinite preservation were instigated two years before the false wall made access impossible, but examination and documentation of condition was not undertaken. This inaction means that the degree of physical alteration over time will be unquantifiable.

It is therefore suggested that when acquiring a work with a defined lifespan, institutions should assess the degree of conceptual importance attributed to temporality. This is a pre-emptive measure in anticipation of the possibility that the owning institution may subsequently wish to prolong the lifespan of the work. In cases where the artist confirms temporality is not integral to concept and there is potential for long-term display, information on materials and artist preferences for long-term care should be gathered. Examination of approaches towards other works within the artist's oeuvre can also provide relevant information; for instance, while temporality is an important factor within Wright's wider practice, given appropriate conditions he will approve entry of works to permanent collections.

The status allocated to works within museum collections is of great importance for optimum documentation at initial installation. But

artwork status is itself changeable; subject to collecting trends which influence accessioning and de-accessioning choices. While the allocation of permanent status to an artwork should ensure a certain level of care, it cannot in itself prevent the premature degradation of unstable materials, nor should it fix works where a degree of 'performativity' is integral to concept. Furthermore, the (im)permanence of the artwork is fundamentally destabilized by collection development and change. Investigation into the endurance of originally temporary works must also be understood in relation to this broader context.