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Article: Uncovered and Unconventional: Preserving Works on Paper and Photographs on Open Display

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# **Uncovered and Unconventional: Preserving Works on Paper and Photographs on Open Display**

**Nina Quabeck**

*Presented as a poster at the 2014 AIC Annual Meeting in San Francisco*

## **ABSTRACT**

The format of the frame, quintessentially emphasizing the preciousness of a work of art, is often problematic or even undesirable for modern and contemporary works on paper and photographs. In many cases, these works are large-scale, three-dimensional or even more like room-spanning installations - in short unconventional - and a far cry from the traditional contained paper-based artwork. Today, many institutions have examples of photographs and works on paper which require uncovered display in their collections, so conservators are frequently faced with the challenge to find innovative solutions to mount, store and travel these fragile works. A research project funded by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and hosted by the paper conservation lab of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF) yielded a chance to explore the subject in depth. Part of the research was a general survey in which paper conservators spoke frankly of their preferred methods of installation, travel and storage of uncovered works, as well as of the pitfalls they encountered. As a case study, the presentation format of Robert Rauschenberg's *Cardbird II* was reviewed. This paper summarizes the findings of the research to date and outlines the state-of-the-art preservation options for these complex objects. A second case-study describes how conservators at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen dealt with the 2013 Wolfgang Tillmans exhibition that consisted almost entirely of uncovered works.

## **1. THE RISE OF OPEN DISPLAY**

This paper sets out to summarize the preservation options of modern and contemporary photographs and works on paper which are intended to be displayed unenclosed, here on referred to as *uncovered* or on *open display*. The inherent fragility of paper has typically underscored the necessity for enclosed display, the effort to place works on paper and photographs in frames, acrylic boxes and showcases being based on the assumption that this is an effective way of mitigating damage while objects are on show. However, the format of the frame may be undesirable for a number of reasons.

One reason is that contemporary art on paper comes in sizes that can make glazing and framing impractical and expensive. The scale of works on paper and photographs seems to be forever increasing, stretching the boundaries of drawing, painting and photography closer to installation work. The tremendous technological advances in printing large-format photographs and ink-jet prints have spurred the trend of large uncovered works since the late 1990s, so that today's monumental photographs and works on paper have indeed taken over the gallery space formerly attributed to paintings.

Apart from practical or monetary aspects, the immediacy of open display is often favored by many artists. Thus, opting for open display is in many cases a conceptual choice, a result of the artist striving for an immediate connection between the viewer and the work by creating an environment in which the viewer is immersed, rather than presenting a work where the viewer stands on the outside.

A prime example of an artist striving for immediacy is Wolfgang Tillmans, who has presented his prints mounted to the gallery walls unframed since the early 2000s and states: "I wanted to avoid the heavy language of large-scale photographs. The unframed inkjet-print was definitely an exception to that language, and it was seen as a dramatic, rebellious gesture at the time, although it has since become a common practice. But for me, it was not so much an objection to the frame. It was about the love of this immaculate object as it comes out of the printer or processing device" (Michelle Kuo in conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans, 2012).



Fig. 1. Installation view, K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Duesseldorf, 2013  
Left: Freischwimmer 230, right Freischwimmer 155, Inkjet prints  
397,4 x 298,1 cm and 260,8 x 466,1 cm

The changing role of the museum may also play a part in how the cultures of display shifted from enclosed to uncovered. In his book "The Engaging Museum," Graham Black describes that in the past, access to artworks in museums "was almost grudgingly provided in return for a sense of reverence and gratitude, reflected in a rather authoritarian protection of the site- "temple" architecture, cordoned routes, glass cases, security guards, "do not touch" signs, et cetera. However, in recent decades, while protection of the ... collection has remained the first priority ... there have been increasing pressures for a change in the way in which the material is presented to the public." (Black 2005:1). He states that "visitors are no longer willing to be passive recipients of wisdom from on high, but want to participate, to ask questions, and to take part as equals." Apart from artists and visitors, museum professionals such as curators and designers are also very vocal in their wish for access. Museum designers seek to create the

“transparent museum,” an exhibition space in which nothing comes between the object and the viewer. Thus, the culture of display today is aiming at integration and social inclusion, through participation and unhindered access.

## **2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SURVEY DESIGN**

The study “Uncovered and Unconventional” was instigated by Debra Evans, Head of Paper Conservation at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, who frequently found herself in charge of big paper objects and, in 2004, secured funding from the Samuel H. Kress foundation to study the storage options of large-format works on paper. In 2006, she engaged the Kress to sponsor the follow-up project dealing with uncovered art.

A major part of the study was a general survey involving professionals caring for modern and contemporary art collections. The goal of this survey was to examine the paper and photograph conservator’s means of protecting works intended for open display during installation, exhibition, travel and storage.

It was obvious that much could be gained by questioning conservators and other museum professionals with the purpose of collecting practical hands-on advice as well as identifying points of concern in protecting uncovered works on paper. Polled in the survey were forty four professionals, paper conservators as well as a number of registrars, in North America and Europe. Interviews were conducted face-to-face during site visits whenever possible, on the telephone, or via email. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were most revealing, as opinions were more likely to be revealed and elaborated. Site visits were also a great opportunity to view uncovered, unconventional works on display or to see inventive examples of storage.

For the survey, a questionnaire consisting of a list of 18 pre-formulated specific questions was devised. A qualitative approach was chosen, and accordingly, the questions were phrased in an open-ended way. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part, “Exhibition,” concerned display techniques and experiences with safe keeping and maintaining uncovered art on paper during open display. Different mounting methods were discussed in detail as well as different types of barriers. The second part, “Travel,” concerned precautions conservators took during loans, and the third, “Storage,” aimed at gathering insights into the solutions and pitfalls of keeping the works safe between times of display.

The questionnaires were emailed to the participants prior to the arranged site visit or telephone interview, then filled in by hand by the interviewer throughout the conversation. Afterwards, the interviewees received a transcript of the notes to annotate. Where neither a site-visit nor a telephone interview was possible, participants emailed their answers back to the author.

## **3. SURVEY RESULTS**

The information gathered by the interviewers was analyzed and summarized for this article by the author. The findings were grouped and are being presented according to the categories of the questionnaire.

### 3.1. General Exhibition Related Aspects of Open Display

In at least half of the institutions whose conservators were polled in this survey, uncovered works on paper are being encountered on a regular basis. The majority of the participants stated that they started presenting works on paper on open display in the course of the past ten years, although a few participants have records of displaying uncovered works on paper as early as the 1970s and 1980s.

When asked about working with artists when installing a piece, it transpired that collaboration with artists is routine for all participants, particularly with temporary exhibitions. Most conservators polled make it a point to actively work with the artist to develop and record techniques. Participants agreed that with contemporary works, installation decisions should be made in conjunction with the artist and thoroughly recorded for future installs.

In general, documentation is regarded as a vital part of the preservation of contemporary works by all professionals polled in this survey. Making use of technologies such as video, digital photography, and three-dimensional scans to complement documentation was mentioned by several participants, especially when it came to room-spanning installation art. One stated “installation instructions are a fundamental part of the conservation report... A video is often made to discuss the installation, artist intentions and preservation issues. This is done following the INCCA guidelines and transferred also to the INCCA database. For further information and guidelines toward artist interviews, see [www.incca.org](http://www.incca.org).

Another useful point regarding the preservation of uncovered art on paper and photographs was raised by conservators at SFMOMA, who pointed out that unconventional contemporary pieces often require a commitment of substantial future resources to preserve them as functioning works of art. At their institution this fact is recognized by involving the conservation department in the acquisition process from the start. Information is compiled in a report, referred to as the “Pre-Accession Summary,” which addresses the exhibition requirements, storage costs and preservation needs for each individual piece (Amanda Hunter Johnson, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, personal communication, November 2007).

### 3.2 Display Techniques

Advice from the conservation professional may sometimes be required in an installation situation and knowledge of different mounting methods is thus advantageous. However, this is not to say the conservator can pick and choose among the various tools. After all pins look very different from magnets or staples, and artists are often very specific about which hanging system to use. The job of the conservator is first and foremost to respect the artist’s aesthetic choices and to implement his or her system safely.

#### 3.2.1 Magnets<sup>1</sup>

Popular with a majority of contributors to this study, magnets have been used for display by paper conservators for more than 20 years. Rare earth magnets (neodymium magnets) have been particularly useful in installing large works on paper because of their strength.

There are many ways to mount an uncovered work with magnets, from the straightforward way of using a target attached or screwed into the wall and placing a rare earth magnet on the surface of the object, to the more elaborate ways of using magnets in combination with hinges.

At the FAMSF, magnets have been employed to mount large uncovered works quite often. Conservators there recommend purchasing plastic-coated rare earth magnets or covering magnets with colored Japanese paper to match paper color. They also sometimes adhere a barrier layer of acid-free blotter to the bottom in order to soften their pull and reduce possible impressions

### 3.2.2 Pins

Almost every contributor to this study stated that he or she has employed some form of pinning to mount uncovered works on paper, and quite a few frequently so. Materials used range from nails to aluminum head pins to glass head pins. Among the participants who used pushpins, the reinforcement of pinholes is of concern. Many conservators stated that they may reinforce more light-weight works on the reverse with Japanese paper attached with starch paste, if pinholes are to be re-used. When using pins to mount large works on paper, care should be taken to use enough pins to fully support the work so as not to induce deformations in the artwork or enlargement of the holes. At the Kunstsammlung, a two-piece Paul McCarthy collage is mounted with nails, placed at regular intervals along the edges. As the paper still has a fairly strong curl to it, the support is secured with small polyamide discs to prevent it from slipping off the nails.



Fig. 2. Installing Paul McCarthy's *Ribs of the Ship/Ribs of the Captain* at K21



Fig. 3. Detail of a polyamide disc employed to prevent the paper support from curling and slipping off the nail.

### 3.2.3 Staples

Stapled works on paper have been used fairly frequently in the realm of commercial galleries or art fairs, but also in museum settings. When employing staples, preliminary tests on the exhibition walls are strongly recommended. Staples as mounting devices were encountered at the Kunstsammlung when the team was required to install a work by Toba Khedoori for a temporary exhibition in 2010. Khedoori creates her drawings and paintings on enormous sheets of white

paper hand-coated with layers of translucent wax into which the artist incises an image. Since the early 2000s, her works have entered many collections, where they go on display in the way they were mounted in the artist's studio, that is, stapled to the wall in a somewhat haphazard fashion.

The author felt comfortable using the prescribed staples after having carried out in-depth testing in preparation with a pneumatic staple gun. Following the advice of Khedoori-savvy colleagues, the author adjusted the staple gun to a setting that had the staples floating off the wall, not touching the surface of the paper substrate

### 3.2.4 Hinges

Contributors found that attaching paper hinges to works of art on paper is not only useful for matting and framing, but also for works on paper on open display. Hinges which have been attached to a work on paper can be folded back "V-hinge style" and adhered directly to the wall, so that they don't show. Hinges can also be multilayered for additional installations if desired. Conservators at SFMOMA designed a multiple layer hinge for touring an exhibition of Richard Tuttle collages. To adhere a hinge directly to the wall, Jade 711 has been recommended.

At the FAMSF, a group of large-scale Shi Guoroi photographs was mounted for a temporary exhibition with tyvek-reinforced pendant hinges combined with staples. The hinges were applied to the reverse of the objects, evenly spaced along the top and bottom edge of each work. In the process of installing the works, the photographs were unrolled against the wall, requiring a team of four to avoid handling dents in the process of unfurling, and the hinges stapled to the wall. The hinges were then covered with wooden battens for a more finished look preferred by the artist.



Fig. 4. Shi Guoroi's works being mounted at the DeYoung Museum with a hinge-and-staple-technique.



Fig. 5. Stapling was carried out with blotters attached to the staple gun to avoid damage to the paper surface.

### 3.2.5 Self-adhesive Velcro

When using Velcro on an uncovered object, several conservators stated that they would not use it directly on the paper surface. They would first apply a protective interlayer, generally Japanese paper, to the reverse of the artwork. Some contributors stated that they are not fond of using

Velcro for mounting artworks. The risk Velcro poses for de-installation was listed as one factor that displeased conservators. One conservator recommended inserting a Teflon spatula to release the Velcro to minimize strain on the object when de-installing.

Where Velcro does come in handy is with encapsulated works. At the Kunstsammlung, a large group of Lawrence Weiner posters in polyester sleeves were installed with self-adhesive Velcro-dots in 2009. The Velcro-dots held the works in place beautifully, but were also convenient at de-install, when, due to their small diameter, they allowed for easy removal from the walls.



Fig. 6. Installation view of the Lawrence Weiner exhibition held at K21 in 2009. All posters arrived in polyester sleeves and were attached to the gallery walls with self-adhesive Velcro dots.

### 3.2.6 Clips

Many artists like to mount their works on paper and photographs hung from binder clips suspended from nails. German artist Thomas Schuette is very partial to showing his works on paper suspended from binder clips. When his *Wattwanderung*, a suite of 138 etchings, was installed at K21 in 2012, he suspended them from threads criss-crossing through the room.



Fig. 7. Installation view of Thomas Schuette's *Wattwanderung*, shown at K21 in 2012  
*Wattwanderung*, 2001, 138 etchings on paper, each 32 x 44 cm

With clip mounting, it may be beneficial to line the inner clasps with blotter or matboard to avoid indenting the paper. As with mounting uncovered works with pins, it is advisable to hang large-format works with more than with one clip in each corner, to avoid sagging of the objects.

### 3.2.7 Tape

Some artists like working with self-adhesive tape. At the Kunstsammlung, artists Yoshitomo Nara and Hiroshi Sugito affixed a whole group of works of drawings to the walls of a wooden shack they had erected in the museum gallery in 2006. They used paper-based Washi-tape which was easily removed at the end of the exhibition.

Several contributors list self-adhesive tapes as an alternative method for short-term display. One conservator conceded that while she has mounted uncovered pieces with double-sided foam tape in the past, she was a little hesitant about using it, but ultimately felt it to be acceptable method for short periods of display. She recommended applying an interlayer of Japanese paper to the reverse of the object prior to adhering small pieces of foam tape to the barrier. This will then allow for safe removal when inserting a spatula between the foam tape and the wall.



Fig. 8. Hiroshi Sugito's and Yoshitomo Nara's collaborative works mounted with washi tape onto the walls of a wooden shack.

### 3.3 Protecting uncovered works during installation and exhibition

When uncovered works on paper began to be installed in galleries, many conservators affixed interlayers of polyester, paper, or even Marvelseal between the object and the wall. It is worth noting that most conservators polled in this survey had dispensed with this step, citing that they see no problem with paper artworks contacting a standard gallery wall (ideally, with the wall paint having off-gassed for at least 72hrs). One adding drily that, after all, "most danger to uncovered art is from the front."

Damages from open display do happen, but only a very small number of contributors to the study have encountered acts of vandalism towards uncovered art on paper. So, to bar or not to bar? Few issues are as likely to cause heated debate during the course of an exhibition installation as the topic of barriers in front of uncovered works. Barriers - stanchions, toe bars, tapes or platforms - certainly constitute a visual interference and are often disliked by both artists and curators. Many contemporary museums have made it their policy to be as "barrier-free" as possible to allow their patrons to experience artworks unhindered. To evaluate the necessity of barriers, contributors were asked about their experiences with the behavior of members of the public around objects on open display. It transpired that conservators at institutions located a little off the beaten path seem to have fewer problems with misbehaving patrons. On the other

end of the spectrum, institutions that are considered tourist attractions in themselves reported the most problems. If an exhibition is expected to draw huge numbers of visitors, the call for a barrier might well be justified. On the other hand, institutions with moderate visitors numbers and/or vigilant guards might be in a position to do without barriers.

Contributors to this study had a lot to say about the different types of barriers employed in the museum environment, pointing out their pitfalls, their benefits, and also their limits. As one contributor pointed out “those who are touchy-feely are often not put off by something that is easily overcome.” Floor tapes are probably the type of barrier that can be spotted most frequently in museums, followed by platforms, stanchions and toe bars. It was noted that guards seem fond of tapes because they give a tangible distance to point at when re-directing a visitor closing in on an artwork. Stanchions, on the other hand, are often felt to be aesthetically unsuitable for contemporary works. Also, the majority of contributors also disliked the tripping hazards they create, especially in a crowded gallery situation. Platforms are perhaps the most favored form of barrier. The author often spotted platforms in those instances when an artwork was centrally placed or extended onto the gallery floor.

As an alternative to physical barriers, information and education of staff and visitors are key to preventing accidental damage by patrons. One contributor working in an institution that favors a “no-barrier” approach found signage important, as he observed “touching of objects is common especially if the technique is novel and the viewer cannot explain what they are looking at.” Another pointed out the element of confusion created by the display of works that involve visitor participation, which can encourage a feeling of ownership that may result in somewhat blurred boundaries. In general, it seems a good idea to identify such “hot spots” in an exhibition situation and, if a work is very vulnerable, to post a proactive guard nearby to prevent damage by patrons. At the Kunstsammlung, conservators have established a routine of walk-throughs with security staff before a show opens. Guards who are well-informed about the most fragile works have proved to be quite vigilant during the course of exhibition.

### **3.4 Dust! Light! Dealing with the inherent vice of open display**

Unlike damage through accidental or intentional human interaction, the accumulation of dust is one inherent vice of open display that cannot be avoided, and this is a considerable worry for conservators in charge of uncovered works. Depending on the substrate, dust particles can become easily embedded in the paper fibers or the photographic emulsion layer. Dust accumulating on surfaces calls for frequent intervention, which makes it a rather large commitment in a conservator’s schedule. Conservators polled in this survey listed rubber bulb air blowers, hake brushes, microfiber cloths, Dust Bunnies, Pec Pads, and vacuum cleaners as favorite dusting materials.

Conservators polled conceded almost unanimously that they tend to be more generous with light levels for contemporary work than traditional works on paper. In general, conservators should also bear in mind that larger works require a light level that allows the viewer to stand at a distance. A light level of 50 lux does not allow this and is better suited for smaller scale works viewed close up.

Generally, uncovered works are also more exposed and more sensitive to environmental change, so fluctuations in temperature and humidity will have an immediate impact. Thus, the exhibition climate should be constantly monitored when works on paper are on open display in a gallery. Sagging can occur in large works when humidity fluctuates, making it necessary to readjust the hanging system.

### **3.5 Safe Travels!**

Unframed works have a problematic lack of physical protection during handling and transit. Inherent vice and the strain of installation aside, condition problems of contemporary works on paper seem to arise most often from uninformed handling, poor transit housing and improper storage conditions. Uncovered works are under severe risk of damage when being moved if certain essential handling precautions, such as planning the transit route and clearing the passageway, aren't followed.

It is now common knowledge that oversized objects with stable media may often be travelled safely in a rolled format, ideally with the rolled object housed inside a custom built crate. Contributors stated that travel frames of the sort more typically employed for paintings are frequently used not only for transit but also for vertical storage of large uncovered works on paper. While flat uncovered pieces can often be housed and travelled in a fairly straightforward manner, multi piece installations tend to require more elaborate custom-made housing. For example, when devising a storage solution for Kara Walker cut-outs, conservators smoothed them onto sheets of Mylar to accommodate the wax-based coatings on the reverse, and placed the single sheets between archival corrugated boards for storage (Rachel Danzig and Toni Owen, Brooklyn Museum, personal communication, April 2008).

To protectively house a three-dimensional object, a box is an excellent solution, especially if made-to-measure. Although a large range of commercial archival boxes are now available, they tend to come in a limited number of sizes, and a box should be fitted precisely to offer best protection.

## **4. CASE STUDY 1: Robert Rauschenberg's *Cardbird II***

The *Cardbird II* case-study is an example of the decision-making conservators are facing when they deal with uncovered works. At the FAMSF, two works from Robert Rauschenberg's *Cardbirds Series* were requested for loan by a local venue in 2008. The objects, *Cardbird I* and *Cardbird II*, had been part of the museum's collection since 1999.

### **4.1 Background**

Robert Rauschenberg turned to working with cardboard boxes after moving to Captiva Island, Florida, in the early 1970s. He began by using unembellished cardboard, bent, torn or cut into shape, to produce his *Cardboard* pieces. In his *Cardbirds Series*, the artist engaged cardboard as a material and as subject matter, creating faux cardboard-box constructions using silkscreen and offset photo lithography in collaboration with the printers at Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles. For each *Cardbird* in the series, Rauschenberg created a prototype from found cardboard pieces. The prototypes were then photographed and painstakingly reproduced by the printers to yield the materials for the edition. Each label, each crease, and each smudge of dirt on the prototype was

carefully printed to replicate the found box from which it was derived. These printed images of cardboard surfaces were ultimately laminated onto backing board, adorned with pieces of tape, staples, and more cardboard. The look of "ordinary cardboard" deceives the eye, so that the sophisticated techniques developed by the artist and the printmakers remain invisible at first glance.

#### 4.2 Open display for *Cardbird II*

Upon arrival of the works in the conservation lab, it was found that while *Cardbird I* was still uncovered, *Cardbird II* had been mounted in a acrylic box in the past as a means of protection during loans.

It seemed likely that the presentation in the box was not what the artist intended for his piece. To help evaluate the format of display, the Rauschenberg Studio was contacted regarding display and the following answer was received: "Bob Rauschenberg always wanted the *Cardboards* and cardboard-related works installed directly on the wall... We feel that these works should not be shown in a plexi box." (Thomas Buehler, personal communication, 2008).

Photographic records of previous installs are another source of information about the original form of presentation. Thus, it was fortunate that installation shots from Rauschenberg's 1971 exhibition *Cardboards and Cardbirds* at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City that showed the works on open display were published in the Menil catalogue (Bois 2007:139).



Fig. 9. Rauschenberg's *Cardbird II* in its protective box at the FAMSF prior to the loan to Sonoma. *Cardbird II*, silkscreen and photo offset on cardboard, 54'' x 33-1/2''

The conservation department at the Menil Collection was also contacted and questioned about their experiences with the open display of these works. Conservators relayed that the only damages that occurred were shipment related. Barriers were only placed in front of works which extended to the floor, yet no problems with visitor behavior occurred during the course of the exhibition (Brad Epley, personal communication, 2008).

When these facts were presented to the curator in charge, the decision was made to liberate *Cardbird II* from its confines, and to trust the borrowing venue with the uncovered display of both pieces. A new transit system was to be designed to double as housing when the pieces are in storage, saving time and funds in the future.

### 4.3 New transit housing

To support the *Cardbirds*, trays were constructed by lining both sides of double wall archival corrugated board with 4-ply matboard. This “sandwich” proved a very lightweight yet sturdy support material. In order to prevent movement of the objects during transit, the works’ original drill holes were utilized to secure the objects by means of plastic bolts inserted through the bottom of each tray. Fender washers lined with Volara and plastic wing nuts were then threaded onto the protruding bolts to prevent any bouncing during transit. Each tray was provided with a made-to-measure box constructed from double wall archival corrugated board, and the trays were outfitted with twill handles to facilitate lifting them from the box.

It was felt that this made-to-measure housing would be convenient and effective both for in-house storage as well as for long distance travels, where the box could simply be crated for transit. Again, while the initial effort was time-consuming, the tray system in combination with the boxes was found to be a cost-effective solution that would allow for safe-keeping of the works for many years into the future.



Fig. 10. The transit and storage housing devised for *Cardbird II*. *Cardbird II*, silkscreen and photo offset on cardboard, 54” x 33-1/2”

### 4.4 Installing the *Cardbirds*

The Rauschenberg Studio informed the author that the *Cardbirds* were originally mounted to the gallery walls with galvanized 2” roofing nails with a dull surface and kindly supplied a set for reference.

To minimize the strain of repeated installation for the *Cardbirds*, maquettes were produced at the FAMSF prior to the loan. The maquettes were used for placing the *Cardbirds* on the wall, minimizing handling of the actual works, and for marking the holes for the roofing nail. The holes were then pre-drilled with a bit slightly smaller in diameter than the nail’s shaft. The works were placed over the holes, then the nails were inserted manually.



Figs. 11. and 12. Using maquettes to prepare for mounting *Cardbird II* during a test run for the installation.

According to the Rauschenberg studio's information, the nail heads extended above the surface of the works by about 1/8 of an inch. The advantage of this look is that it makes for safe and easy removal of the nails upon de-installation.

The maquettes were placed on the bottom of each box, so that they would travel with their related objects at all times. The maquette-installation system was then successfully repeated at the borrowing venue.

The *Cardbirds Series* has been described as a “tongue in cheek visual joke... The labour intensive process involved in the creation of the series remains invisible to the viewer. The extreme complexity of construction belies the banality of the series and in this way, Rauschenberg references both Pop's Brillo boxes by Warhol and Minimalist boxes such as those by Donald Judd. By selecting the most mundane of materials, Rauschenberg once again succeeds in a glamorous makeover of the most ordinary of objects” (Babington 2007). Liberating *Cardbird II* from its acrylic confines, and presenting both works uncovered, simply tacked to the gallery walls with the roofing nails prescribed by the artist, seemed a decision concurrent with this mind-set. And finally, the beauty of the installed works, floating off the walls like birds in suspended animation, is visual proof that their uncovered presentation is a requirement.



Fig. 13. Detail: Roofing nails extending 1/8 of an inch from *Cardbird II's* surface.



Fig. 14. *Cardbird II* on open display, protected by a platform, at the De Young Museum in 2010.

## 5. CASE STUDY 2: Wolfgang Tillmans at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

Wolfgang Tillmans recounts in a recent interview how, in the early 1990s, he started experimenting with blurring the lines between small hand-printed photographs and large-scale works on paper: “I found a brand-new Canon Color Bubble Jet Copier A1 with an inkjet printer inside it that printed on twenty-four-inch rolls of paper. I realized that I could make large-scale, lightweight pictures by photocopying my smaller, hand-printed photographs from the darkroom and enlarging them to four by five feet. I hung each picture as a sheet of paper on the wall, unframed, so that there was nothing between the viewer and the ink-saturated matte surface” (Kuo and Tillmans 2012:423).

In his 2013 exhibition at K21, the Kunstsammlung’s venue for Contemporary Art, he showed 65 large-scale inkjet prints as well as 169 smaller chromogenic prints - all uncovered apart from a few exceptions. Tillmans is known for “assuming a curatorial role as an aspect of his artistic practice and he dislodges any clear-cut boundary between curator and artist”, with his “auto-curatorial processes and installation methods...he proposes a reconfiguration of art(ist)/institution/viewer relations” (Ault 2012: 121). In the intense period of installing this exhibition (the process took 3 weeks and involved a team of 6 art-handlers, 8 studio assistants, 1 conservator and the curator), the artist was present the entire time –including night shifts - and in control of every part of the process. In fact, he was very much involved even in the planning stage, determining the exhibition focus, which works to show, and where they would be placed. The installation style the artist employed at K21 varied from very precise, evenly spaced rooms of large inkjet prints to grids of small chromogenic prints to packed rooms with works floor-to-ceiling, with clusters here and there, perhaps reminiscent of a teenager’s room or an office bulletin board.

He has his monumental inkjet prints hanging from the wall suspended by binder clips, and his chromogenic prints simply taped to gallery walls. In one single exhibition, the viewer encounters chromogenic prints, inkjet prints, magazine and print media and also postcards, which for the artist “emphasize fragility and endurance, circulation and access” and installation methods that enable a “seductive, immediate and ephemeral” viewing experience (Ault 2012:136).



Fig. 15. Installation view from the Wolfgang Tillmans show held at K21 in 2013. The chromogenic prints are mounted with self-adhesive tape and the inkjet print on the left is suspended from binder clips.

### 5.1 Learning from the Master

At the Kunstsammlung, the installation team adapted artist Wolfgang Tillmans' unique method for hinging chromogenic prints directly to wall with 3M Scotch Magic tape: "For my small-scale C-type prints, I found a way of taping the photograph that wouldn't harm the surface and was detachable from the back, in order to foreground this attention to materiality" (Kuo and Tillmans 2012:425).

Specifically, his practice involves adhering small strips of Scotch Magic tape in each corner of the reverse of the chromogenic print. The tape is applied in such a way that only a 3mm excess is extending beyond the edge of the print. With the print facing upwards, a second piece of tape exactly the same length as the other is placed on top of the flap of tape extending from the edge of the print. A small gap is left between the second piece of tape and the edge of the print - it does not touch the surface of the print. The print can be handled using the two top „tape hinges,“ placed on its designated wall-space and secured by rubbing the top tape against the wall. In order for the print to align smoothly with the wall, the bottom tape hinges are pulled down and outwards. Again, the print is secured by rubbing the tape against the wall.

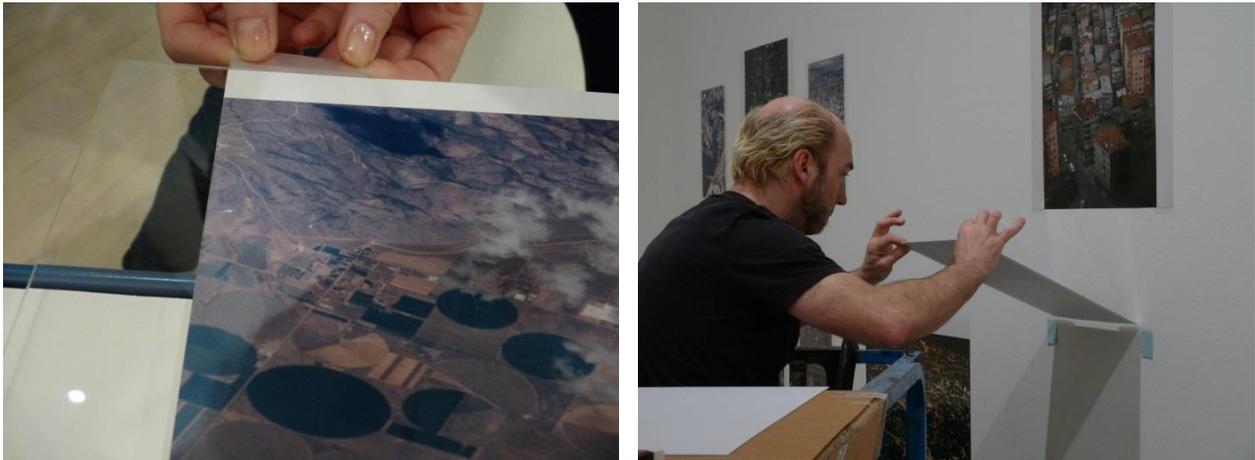


Fig. 16. and Fig. 17. Chromogenic prints in the process of receiving their Scotch Magic tape hinges and being mounted to the wall in the K21 Tillmans exhibition.

Tillmans provides the borrowing institution with very clear instructions how to handle his so called "XL-inkjet prints." The prints travel in a double-tube system devised by the studio. The prints are rolled, face-in, onto inner tubes, their delicate ink surface covered with a layer of very thin polyethylene foil. They are wrapped in a layer of thick paper, and secured onto the tube with tape. The inner tube is then secured with the aid of foam pieces in an outer tube, which is clearly labelled with handling instructions.

The prints are unrolled on the gallery floor on pieces of paper cut to size as a protective interlayer. To reduce the curl, the prints are weighted down along the edges and left to rest over night. It is worth noting that an entire exhibition of such large format prints takes up considerable floor space.



Fig. 18. Inkjet print packed for travel by the Tillmans studio.



Fig. 19. Preparing Freischwimmer 220 for the install.

Hanging the prints requires placing binder clips along the top edge of the works, applying nails in the correct places on the designated wall space, rolling the prints up again, and unrolling the prints against the wall once the top edge is safely suspended from the clips.



Fig. 20. and Fig 21. Preparing to mount Wolfgang Tillmans' large inkjet print *Deer Hirsch* ( 203 x 305 cm) with binder clips.

The manual supplied by Tillmans' studio requests that nails for top edge clips be hammered in a slight upward angle to avoid movement of the clips when the print is hanging, and that the prints be secured at the bottom with a clip in each corner, with the nails hammered into the wall in a slight downward angle.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary works on paper of unprecedented size and shape have entered our museum collections. The evolution from enclosed to open display of photographs and art on paper has occurred concurrent with these acquisitions. We may worry that presenting works this way is

risky, yet “works of art, like human beings, are fated to live dangerously to fulfill themselves. While recklessness must be avoided, foolproof protection is not a feasible alternative.” (Messer 1999: 160) Artists, curators and conservators collaborate creatively in developing solutions that enable an institution to collect, display, and loan uncovered and unconventional contemporary works. As these works age, they will likely become more precious and more fragile. How we deal with this is perhaps the bigger question. One interesting solution to this problem is Wolfgang Tillmans’ approach, who combines preciousness with his desire to present his works in a fully accessible way, and cleverly plays to the strength of the medium, where he will provide display copies and collector copies when his works enter a collection.

#### NOTES

1). A great resource for magnets in installing uncovered works is the paper by Daria Keynan, Julia Barten, Elisabeth Estabrook: "Installation methods for Robert Rymans wall-mounted works" in *The Paper Conservator*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, 2007.

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