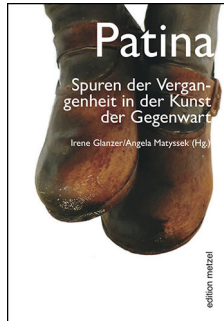



IRENE GLANZER & ANGELA MATYSSEK
(EDS.), *PATINA. SPUREN DER VERGAN-
GENHEIT IN DER KUNST DER
GEGENWART*

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Reviewed by
Hanna B. Hölling 

Patina as Aesthetic, Epistemic and Political Agent in
Contemporary Art. A Review of *Patina. Spuren der
Vergangenheit in der Kunst der Gegenwart*

What is *patina*? Is it a valued aesthetic phenomenon – cherished for its relatedness to the past – or merely a byproduct of materials in perpetual transformation: the grime, dirt, and dust that accrues as an extraneous deposit, a veil separating the intended from the decayed? How do objects cross-temporally communicate with us through patina, and how does patina express time – not only the duration in which and as which it exists, but also as an index of how time materializes, non-mechanistically and non-sequentially? What positive or negative values does patina bear, for whom, and how do these values inform our understanding of authenticity, decay, and the agency of materials?

In his landmark essay *The Value of Age and Decay* (1994), cultural geographer David Lowenthal observed that the perceived worth of many buildings and artworks has often been amplified by the patina of age – particularly since the Romantic fascination with

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ruins and fragments.¹ What he calls “erosions and the incidents of age” can, however, stand in subtle tension with the historical, scientific and aesthetic criteria conventionally invoked to justify a work’s status as heritage.

The essay collection *Patina. Spuren der Vergangenheit in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, edited by Irene Glanzer and Angela Matyssek, treads a careful path between the allure and the peril of patina. It responds to the urgency of mapping the various interpretations of patina in recent art – and to its long and prominent discussion in more traditional visual art genres. Having grown out of a symposium organized by the editors in December 2019 at the Hochschule der Künste Dresden in collaboration with the Doerner Institute, the collection brings together a range of perspectives in which the voices of art historians engage – at times harmoniously, at times in productive contradiction – with those of conservators, collection stewards, artists, and collectors.

Across these varied, whether philosophical-reflective, scientific, technical, story-driven or anecdotal contributions, patina, as a multivalent concept, pulses with meaning, including aesthetic, conceptual and structural transformations within artworks. For the editors, patina is a key lens through which to understand the relationship between art and time (p. 7). Yellowing varnish on paintings or verdigris on bronze may be taken as indicators of authenticity. Patina may thus be seen as a heterotopic space pointing to an “other time”. As one of the many manifestations of decay, it may bring us closer to what Irene Glanzer describes as the “materiality of aging” (p. 71).

The book opens with a thoughtful essay on the evolving status of patina, not merely as a sign of material aging, but as an active participant in aesthetic, historical and conservation discourses. Tracing a trajectory from the seventeenth-century valorization of patina in art contexts and reflecting later foundational thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Alois Riegl, the authors position patina in the tangled historical sedimentations as a culturally and ideologically charged phenomenon. The observation that artists have long manipulated the signs of age for effect adds nuance to the traditional dichotomy between the “natural” and the “artificial”, authenticity and deception. Most compelling is the discussion of contemporary artistic practices that engage patina not only as a visual effect but as a conceptual tool. The authors convincingly assert that patina operates as an instrument of artistic research, opening pathways toward critical material practice.

Ursula Haller (Chapter 1) provides a comprehensive overview of the notion of patina within the context of conservation. The dictionary definitions aside, the essay truly shines when Haller draws upon her extensive research and wide-ranging scholarship

1

David Lowenthal, The Value of Age and Decay, in: W. E. Krumbein, Peter Bimblecombe, D. E. Cosgrove, and S. Staniforth (eds.), *Durability and Change. The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage*, London 1994, 39–49, here 39.

in the history and theory of conservation. This depth of insight is especially commendable given how rare such profound engagement is in much contemporary literature on conservation history. From Riegl, through George Dehlio, Cesare Brandi, and other key authors, Haller offers a tour de force of the understanding of patina in the field – a richly rewarding discussion well supported by relevant sources.

For Eva Kernbauer (Chapter 2), patina emerges as both a material and a metaphorical trace of time. The text weaves together three case studies – Eva Hesse, Tacita Dean, and Joachim Koester – to connect the physical aging of materials (as in Hesse’s decomposing latex sculptures) with broader epistemological questions of historical presence and aesthetic meaning (as in Dean’s analogue film or Koester’s archival reactivations). Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Dan Karholm, and Georges Didi-Huberman, the author situates the discussion within debates on contemporaneity, reproducibility, and the ontology of the artwork. While there are moments when theoretical frameworks take precedence, these are balanced by direct engagement with the artworks set against the backdrop of a historiographical shift – from linear, origin-based narratives toward models of after-historicism and temporal multiplicity.

Pia Gotschaller (Chapter 3) examines both visible and invisible traces in artworks – whether as damage, welcome signs of age, or deliberately integrated elements – in the work of Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, Liz Deschenes, Cy Twombly, and Christian Bonnefoi. In Auerbach’s and Freud’s late work, the progressive physical aging of the artists is thematically acknowledged and mirrored in their evolving painting techniques. Deschenes and Twombly employ materials and methods that visibly register the passage of time, while Bonnefoi revisits earlier themes and techniques in new configurations. Eschewing a strict grounding in philosophical traditions (for example, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty), the essay instead argues for a distinction between temporality and material decay.

Irene Glanzer (Chapter 4) explores the material and conceptual implications of patina and aging in Maria Lassnig’s painting *Spannungsfiguration* (1961), using the visible traces of time – craquelure, deformation, and fingerprints – as entry points into broader debates on authorship, authenticity, and conservation ethics. She shows how Lassnig’s ambiguous position – valuing both the freshness of painterly surface and accepting material degradation – complicates strict aesthetic or historical readings of such traces as either damage or intrinsic value. Glanzer ultimately argues for a nuanced and context-sensitive conservation approach that acknowledges the cultural and artistic significance of aging processes, while questioning the limits of conservation in preserving or erasing them.

Christian Scheidemann’s engagement with dirt and dust – two distinct yet related elements in art-historical and conservation discourse – mirrors the way “damaged” and “messy” are so often measured against their presumed opposites, “clean” or “pure”

(Chapter 6). A recognized, recently retired, authority on New York's conservation scene and an internationally active voice in the conservation of contemporary art, Scheidemann weaves vivid anecdotes about over-cleaned works and the ill-judged removal of dust or dirt. Dust, as Jorge Otero Pailos elsewhere demonstrates when peeling silicone skins from architectural structures, can carry both aesthetic and historical value.² As Scheidemann notes – somewhat recalling Lowenthal's reflections on the value of age and decay – dust is typically regarded as something superfluous, to be removed and discarded as pollution accumulated on objects.

Caroline Bohlmann (Chapter 7) offers eloquent insights into Joseph Beuys's three installations drawn from her extensive career as a conservator at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart Berlin. The text examines how patina operates not merely as a sign of material aging but as a conceptual layer that reveals the shifting identity and reception of artworks. It shows that conservation decisions affect not only the physical state of the works but also their historical and symbolic meanings, prompting fundamental questions about authenticity, temporality, and intention in the context of conservation.

For any performance-art connoisseur – or, more precisely, for a connoisseur of its material culture – Mareike Herbstreit's essay on the patina of performance (Chapter 8), explored through examples of Paul McCarthy's "action relics", is a feast. For Herbstreit, these remnants of past actions – confined to cases and suitcases – are at once banal and monstrous. They challenge the (Phelanian) view of performance as a purely ephemeral, disappearing act, while embodying what Herbstreit identifies as the patina of performance.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro's detailed insights into the making and remaking of art, and into the ways canonical American artists confront the "falsification of time" revealed through her conversations addressing, among others, refabrication (Chapter 9), resonate with Angela Matyssek (Chapter 10). Matyssek's essay examines the photographic effects and the varying degrees to which material-specific alterations are accepted – or resisted – within photography. She shows how yellowing and other forms of change in photographs often lead to remaking and reproduction. These processes, however, are fraught, particularly because photographic techniques have evolved significantly over time, resulting in new reproductions that differ in quality from their earlier counterparts.

Frederike Waentig and Andreas Weisser examine patina in plastics (Chapter 11) and media art (Chapter 12), respectively. Weisser's detailed, essential analysis of alteration processes frames patina as a constellation of "damage" phenomena in film and video, focusing on the functionality of playback devices and information

2

Jorge Otero Pailos and Hanna Hölling, *Materials, Objects, Transitions*. Jorge Otero-Pailos in Conversation with Hanna Hölling, in: Hanna Hölling, Francesca Bewer, and Katharina Ammann (eds.), *The Explicit Material. Inquiries on the Intersection of Curatorial and Conservation Cultures*, Leiden 2019, 255–272, here 258–259.

carriers. What could be added here is that experimental minimalist filmmakers and media pioneers, such as, among others, Stan Brakhage or Nam June Paik, left us with altered analogue films or media apparatuses stripped of their active playback function that offer a fascinating and profound entry point into a wider discussion of patination in media art. Waentig, in a compelling reassessment of her earlier position in *Kunststoffe in der Kunst* (2004) – where she argued that plastics cannot develop a patina – demonstrates that all forms of plastic degradation, visible or hidden, ultimately lead to the material's and the work's demise. The romanticizing allure of patina aside, conserving works made from polyurethane or cellulose acetate remains impossible.

Several interviews further diversify the volume. Among them is a conversation with Martin Honert (Chapter 5), in which his realistic, memory-driven *mise-en-scènes* vibrate between the gloss and metaphorical “historical dust” – reminding of Monika Wagner's recent essay.³ In another, Karin Sander (Chapter 13) responds to more than forty questions that, with varying degrees of detail and scrutiny, probe the meaning of patina in her work. Her simple, smiling “yes”, leaves the space resonating with the stains and dirt on the printed page. Finally, a discussion with collector Egidio Marzona and conservators Scheidemann and Bernhart Schwenk (Chapter 14) reveals the fine line between traces of use, dirt and patina in collections, and the continuous effort by conservators to “manage change” by assessing alteration processes in artworks through comparison with an uncountable number of protocols and condition reports.

Patina emerges in this ambitious and intellectually rewarding book as an active component of meaning. One of the book's most appealing aspects, familiar from Matyssek's earlier anthologies such as *Wann stirbt ein Kunstwerk?* (*When does an artwork die?*, 2010), is its effort to loosen the rigid boundaries of art-historical theorization by inviting conservators, artists, and collection custodians to take a stance. The material literacy of the voices woven throughout this narrative is particularly compelling, and the resulting transdisciplinarity is its most exciting feature.

Perhaps as a side effect of the multidirectionality of the present contributions, the attempt to lift the concept of patina to a conceptual level – such as, potentially, through the palimpsestic accretion of iterations of an installative or performative work, or by crosslinking with other concepts of patina from anthropology or archaeology, or even with alternative discussions in conservation – remains some-

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Monika Wagner, Staub und Glanz. Konzepte von Materialität und Dematerialisierung, in: Roger Fayet and Regula Krähenbühl (eds.), *Kunst und Material. Konzepte, Prozesse, Arbeitsteilungen*, Zurich 2022, 15–31.

what unrealized.⁴ Of course, like every anthology, the book is comprehensive in certain areas and underrepresents others.

The book focuses on Western art history and conservation, with its apparatus reliant on the mainly European and US American artistic canon. While this is likely a deliberate editorial choice, it may also be interpreted as an omission of other perspectives. Like “dirt” (p. 104), patina carries culturally specific and nuanced meanings, raising the question of who holds the authority to determine what constitutes loss or valuable aging. Across geographies and chronologies, what one culture regards as beautiful wear deserving preservation, another may dismiss as damage requiring restoration.

Patina is never neutral – and especially in our conflict-troubled world marked by the long shadows of imperial and colonial pasts – it is entangled with colonial, economic and aesthetic biases. Bringing objects, practices, and perspectives from beyond the exclusivity of Western expertise and artistry would enhance the understanding of aging and decay. I am thinking here, for instance, of how the installations made of bottle caps and metal detritus by the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui that evoke both traditional craftsmanship and consumer waste carry multivalent patinas embedded in global, post-colonial narratives.

Patina today holds both epistemic and political functions. It can be read as evidence of a work’s temporal, cultural and environmental history, and may be mobilized as a source of knowledge within the web of social relations. Crucially, it serves as a critical lens for reflecting on museological choices, conservation ethics, and the institutional framing of value. In this light, and as we learn from this rich anthology, patina becomes a discursive site – an index of decisions about what to conserve, what to display, and which histories to tell and by whom. The “traces of the past in contemporary art”, as the book’s German subtitle translates into English, surveys the notion of patina within its remit remarkably well – despite the aforementioned critique – and remains a recommended reading in art history, conservation studies, museology, and aesthetics.

4

For an anthropological/profane-archeological account of patina, see Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina. A Profane Archaeology*, Chicago 2016. For patina as a way through which objects communicate with us, written by a conservator, see Sanchita Balachandran, Malignant Patina. A Love Story, in: *West 86th Journal* 27/1, 2020, 73–91.