



Lick and Lather, Janine Antoni, 1993: The bust on the left is made of chocolate, the one on the right from soap.

Janine Antoni / Luhring Augustine

How Do You Conserve Art Made of Bologna, or Bubble Gum, or Soap?

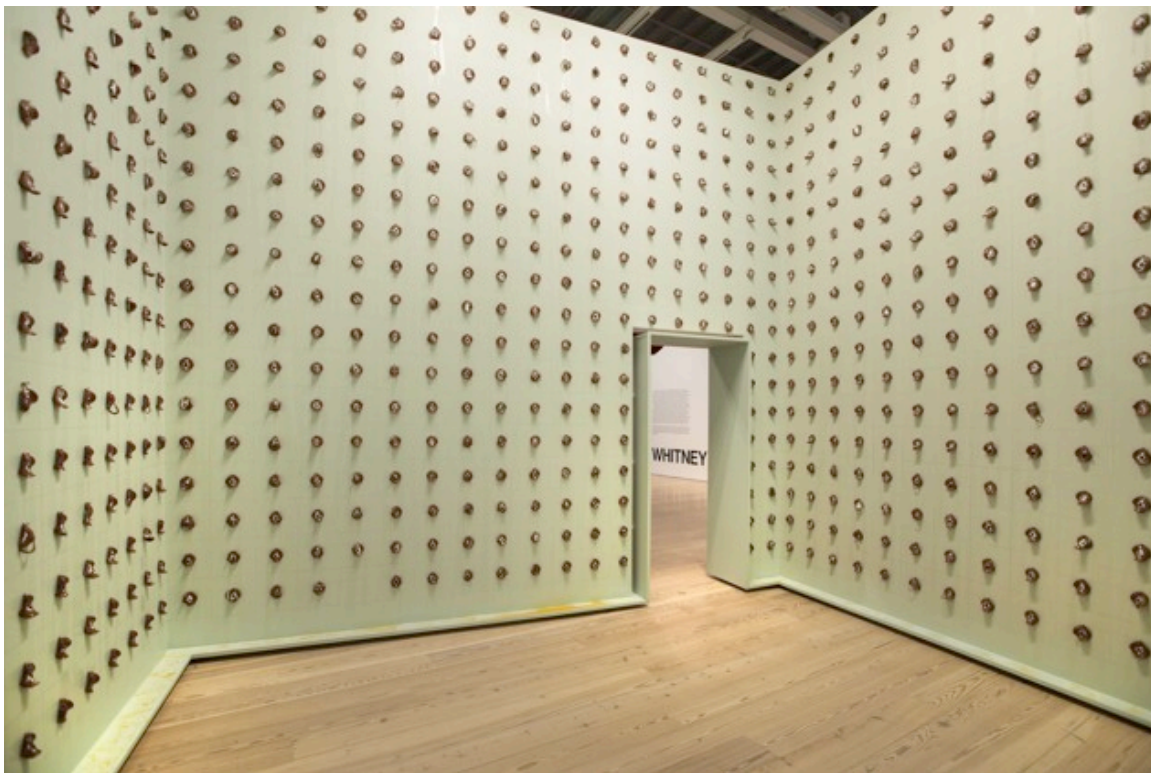
As contemporary artists get more ambitious with their materials, conservators have to find creative ways to preserve the works.

JACOBA URIST | JUN 9, 2017 | **SCIENCE**

Art critics noted the stink as soon as the elevator opened. Indeed, the morning of the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial preview, Pope L.'s contribution smelled like rotten lunch. For good

reason: *Claim*, on view through June 11, consists of 2,755 bologna slices nailed in grid formation on the walls of a small, freestanding room within the exhibition.

Plastic basins catch the grease run-off along the museum floor. By early April, nearly a month later, the stench had faded considerably and in May, it seemed gone, as the bologna dried—or “cured” [per ArtNews](#)—into something probably more akin to beef jerky now. *Claim* considers the usefulness of race as a social category: Affixed to each piece of meat is a photocopy of someone who may or may not be Jewish. According to the Whitney’s label, the number of slices reflects 1 percent of the Jewish population in New York. Or not. The math, we’re told, is a “bit off”—a deliberate misrepresentation that doesn’t actually correspond to census data, the pictures taken at random. What, the artist is asking, makes us think we can recognize Jews—or any other identity—with certainty? On June 2, Pope.L received the Whitney’s prestigious [Bucksbaum Award](#), which grants one Biennial participant—whose work demonstrates a “singular combination of talent and imagination”—a future museum exhibition.



Installation view of Pope.L aka William Pope.L, Claim (Whitney Version), 2017. Whitney Biennial 2017. (Bill Orcutt)

But among the questions it presents, *Claim*, more than other artwork in the Biennial, stresses the unique problems museums and collectors face as contemporary art grows more ambitious in its materials: how to conserve works made of substances meant to last for several days or weeks. After all, it's difficult to imagine bologna portraits transcending millennia like a classical marble bust or centuries like a Rembrandt. Getting a sculpture made of deli meat to survive the decade could even be a stretch. While *Claim* may be an extreme case of perishable art, Pope L. is far from alone. Today's art world is filled with artists using seemingly banal, yet wacky household items— from a [miniature Algerian town](#) made of couscous to a huge [Styrofoam cup cloud](#)— elaborate, significant work that challenges not only what art is, but how exactly, future generations will be able to experience it.

That conservators play a pivotal role in art history is a given. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's [department of scientific research](#) includes researchers with backgrounds in chemistry, biology, geology, and engineering. The director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Harvard Art Museums, Narayan Khandekar, has a Ph.D. in organic chemistry, with post-graduate training at London's Courtauld Institute of Art. A conservator's goal, he says is to ensure that viewers appreciate the art, rather than get distracted by the damages. But conservation decisions can stir up controversy both in and outside the art world. On a busy day, for example, nearly 20,000 tourists can stream through the Sistine Chapel, according to *The New York Times*, trekking dirt particles and humid air with them, slowly degrading the paint on the ceiling's artwork. In 1990, after much debate and public scrutiny, a team of restorers completed a major cleaning of Michelangelo's frescos. Ironically, the restoration might be too good. [Some people worried](#) that the chemical solvent, AB-57— [a gelatinous substance](#) that Vatican assistants applied to the 16th-century masterpiece and then wiped off with distilled water—[produced sharper colors](#) than the artist's original artwork.



Narayan Khandekar, director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Harvard Art Museums, examines a piece composed entirely of rose petals. (Stephanie Mitchell / Harvard)

And artists have long had a love affair with new, malleable materials, making conservation more challenging. [Polymer-based artwork](#) especially has vexed conservators of 20th-century art. Anyone who's left a water bottle in the car too long can attest that light and heat degrade the molecular structure of plastic or resin.

Meanwhile, replacing an outdated part—like a 1960s florescent tube in one of [Dan Flavin's light installations](#)—has also forced curators to decide what is an acceptable change after an artist dies, explains Don Thompson, author of *[The Orange Balloon Dog: Bubbles, Turmoil and Avarice in the Contemporary Art Market](#)*. The structure of light bulbs are different now and certain colors have been discontinued, Thompson says, raising questions about which materials can substitute for the original without compromising an artwork's legitimacy. Flavin, a minimalist pioneer, was known for using readily available, mass-produced items as a matter of principle, such as light bulbs he [purportedly bought](#) on Canal Street in Soho. His intent was to create sculptures from ordinary hardware store materials, knowing they would eventually become obsolete.

But the transient nature of some of the most recent artwork is distinctive: These artists are using products that are meant to

decompose rapidly by design. For this segment of 21st-century art, museums are consciously conserving art as it's created. Now, scientists must invent ways to preserve the most tenuous of materials, rather than simply restoring pieces to their original—or most authentic—luster.

Even seasoned buyers can be caught unaware by how much contemporary work is made of materials that deteriorate quickly, says Emily MacDonald-Korth. She is the founder of Art Preservation Index, a kind of Standard & Poor's for the art market that issues a durability report on a painting or a sculpture's likelihood of technological obsolescence. Fragility is a particular concern as art prices continue to break records: What precisely are private collectors and museums acquiring? How long will their investments last? Brooklyn artist [Dan Colen](#), for example, is famous for using bubblegum to create textured "paintings." His freestyle technique and faintly bad boy persona have [drawn comparisons](#) to Jackson Pollock. "Is it bubblegum, or is it an abstract painting using bubblegum?" he's [said](#) of his work. And while the contemporary art market can be fairly opaque, in 2010, a piece from Colen's gum period titled *S & M* [sold](#) at Phillips auction house for over half-a-million dollars. Philanthropists [Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz](#) own multiple pieces of his work that they share with the public at their contemporary art space in Miami. At first, as Colen [told *The New York Times* writer](#) Carol Vogel, he and his studio assistants "just started chewing"—everybody would have to do it "all day long." Still, they couldn't produce enough material, yielding only three paintings in a year. So he started heating the gum to the right consistency instead, which then hardens and dries on the canvas like paint.