

# Complications with “My Birth”

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## ABSTRACT

In March 2018 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened their biennial exhibition celebrating New Photography. Established in 1985, the series is a significant part of the Museum’s contemporary photography program and has introduced new work by over 100 artists from around the world. The 2018 exhibition, *Being*, focused on how photography can capture what it means to be human.

Two weeks before the close of *Being* the Department of Photography at MoMA specified interest in acquiring a site-specific installation from the exhibition. The installation “My Birth” by Carmen Winant consists of approximately three thousand images of women in various stages of childbirth, all taped, floor to ceiling to the gallery walls of a narrow corridor. The artist collected the images for the installation from books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other ephemera, creating a passageway of images with various colors and textures.

The objects were installed in the gallery, under the direction of the artist, with blue painter’s tape. Several tape loops were used to secure the pieces to the walls, while a small piece of blue tape was used on the recto for aesthetic purposes. Occasionally, tape had been employed on verso to repair tears and join images that were separated by book spines. Some of the materials had been used by the artist in smaller installations and exhibited skinned areas from previous tape removal.

This talk will focus on the acquisition considerations and conservation implications of acquiring a tape installed work of this magnitude. It will outline the decisions surrounding the when, how and why to remove tape, repair tears, and consolidate skinned areas on around three thousand objects. It will address how the museum in conjunction with the artist can develop an installation methodology that is safe for the works but respects the artist installation desires; and when and if it is appropriate to make facsimiles of inherently fragile components.

As artists stretch the bounds of museum installations, conservators should work with the artist to devise safe and appropriate installation methods. As a result of the installation of “My Birth”, conservation is developing a document of talking points to initiate discussions with artists and museum stake-holders surrounding complicated installations. The goal of the document is to raise awareness of the need to work with the artist to safely install works while preserving the artist’s intent and aesthetic.

This presentation will discuss the trials and tribulations of the exhibition and potential acquisition of this large installation with the goal of providing insight to other museum conservators who may encounter similar complicated objects.