Fields of the Future
A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center
Episode 3: Ellen Carrlee—Collaborative Conservation
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Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. An interview series by Bard Graduate Center that highlights the work of scholars, artists, and writers who are changing the way we think about the material world. In this episode Soon Kai Poh speaks to conservator Ellen Carrlee about Indigenous collaboration and the role of the conservator in networks of care.

Soon Kai Poh: Hi. I'm Soon Kai Poh, the conservationist as a human science fellow at the Bard Graduate Center and I'm thrilled today to be speaking with Ellen Carrlee who is a conservator at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, Alaska. Hi Ellen, and welcome.

Ellen Carrlee: Hi, good to be here.

Soon Kai Poh: Before we begin I would like to respectfully acknowledge the place where the Bard Graduate Center is located as Lenapehoking, the ancestral territory of the Lenni-Lenape and recognize New York City as a past, current, and future home for many Indigenous peoples. I'd also like to express my gratitude as a guest in this space as we begin our conversation today. So for starters, could you tell us a little about your relationship to objects?

Ellen Carrlee: Sure. I am an objects conservator. I got into this profession through art history and a background in studio art, but also with a desire to combine art and science together. So artistically before I came in to conservation, I was really interested in metalsmithing, but after I got into conservation, I started to get really interested in things that used to be plants and animals and that led me into kind of my biggest interest, which has to do with material culture that's made by Indigenous people.

Soon Kai Poh: I'd like you to pick up on what you just said and ask if you might elaborate more about any current areas of interest you might have, whether that's in sort of benchwork practice or in research?

Ellen Carrlee: The biggest interest that I have lately has been in gut, as a material of material culture. Gut being the internal organs like intestine and stomach and bladder and esophagus from mammals, usually marine mammals. We see this material in museum collections all the time, but it's almost never used on the art market or in cultural practice anymore. This material, museums are full of gut artifacts and conservators, especially about ten years ago, started to really get interested in these materials and research on these materials. I felt like understanding why it's an obsolete material and why it's a special material was a question that I wanted to look into more deeply, especially from a cultural point of view. I felt like objects are really fascinating and important, but they're important to people, so what are the cultural practices

that involved gut and why is it an obsolete material? The question I was really pursuing is if you have an obsolete material, does that indicate obsolete relationships among people and animals and objects. So this question of relationships led me to pursue this research as a PhD in anthropology. So I've been doing fieldwork with Alaska Native people to try to understand gut as a material of material culture.

Soon Kai Poh: Oh, really interesting. I guess thinking about gut as a broader metaphor, sort of digesting information in a blasé way if you will, but also something that's so common to us as people too and yet such an under studied material. I find what you described really interesting and to me it feels that conventionally conservators have drawn this distinction between practical benchwork and research activities. What you've described appears to be this blend of the two, so I was hoping to hear from your perspective what is research in conservation? What does conservation research look like and how might it be related to the practical work of conservation that we might otherwise be more acquainted with in the restoration of artifacts and whether maybe this line of distinction is really an arbitrary one?

Ellen Carrlee: I think this question of research is really vital to conservation as a profession, because I feel like it's part of what makes professionals professionals is that we do research. And what, for me at least, triggers off doing research is when I have a problem or treatment or something I need to do in the museum and I go to the literature or I go to my usual resources and there's a gap. The article that I want or the book that I want or the expert that I want, I can't find it. So that triggers off research to try to fill that gap and come up with that resource that I wish had been out there. Then the other component of course is to share that, to disseminate it. To put it out there, because I don't really feel like you're doing research if you're not sharing it. The other aspect of research that I think is really exciting is that there are these two paths of research that I see in my work. One of them is when you can get your head around a question and a problem and you can kind of try to know everything there is to know about it and know all your options and make a decision. Then there's another path where it's too big and just as one person you can't get your head around it. It's outside your skill set. It's outside what you can understand and make choices of and you're kind of over your head a little bit. In the first one, I'll give an example that I came to the Alaska State Museum in 2006 and there was a refrigerator full of wet archeological basketry that needed treatment. It was this very clear, this was going to turn to mud in these totes of water if we don't treat it. I need to treat it. The protocol that tends to work well for this is polyethylene glycol impregnation, or a PEG treatment. So with another conservator, Dana Senge, who I think is now with the Park Service, she also dealt with water logged basketry. We read all 200 articles on PEG treatments and which ones worked and which ones didn't. Dana had the opportunity to go and look at collections where they had done treatments on baskets and what worked and what didn't. We put all that stuff on the internet and then we did treatment and had results. So this is one of those examples where you can get your head around it and you can kind of do it in this scientific way. But the other example I will give you is a theater organ we have in our collection. A theater organ is something that was used in like the 1920s with silent films as an accompaniment, and it's not just an organ, it also has percussion instruments and flutes and

sleigh bells and all these other instruments, like a tiny orchestra that can be played from the consol. This is part of our museum collection and it's in a public building and it gets played once a week. It's much beloved by the community and the public. But I have no idea how to play an organ. I don't know any of the parts. I don't understand the mechanisms of how it works. I don't understand when and how the bellows need to be releathered or all these things are just beyond me. But yet, I'm supposed to be responsible for the preservation of this instrument, which also has this consumptive use component, where musical instruments can be in their own category of being used to be preserved. So the approach that we're going at with the organ, which is maybe joining up with some of the trends in conservation relating to networks of care, is to come up with something of a dream team of people who do have the expertise to kind of come together at the table and plot out what the next fifty years of this instrument should look like and how we should take care of it and who should take care of it and what kinds of adjustments and changes can be made. I think that that other area of research and practice coming together is especially exciting.

Soon Kai Poh: I find what you talked about categories, very interesting. Do you think that we're trending towards say this direction where we see all objects with their networks of care as you so eloquently put it, and are moving away from this paradigm where there is this possibility where you could conduct research and exhaustively sort of scour the literature for what to do?

Ellen Carrlee: Well I think this touches on a number of really exciting realms of discussion for our conversation. One of them is the idea of preservation versus access to collections. We have put ourselves for a long time as conservators on the preservation side of that duality, that tension. I think that the thing that busts it wide open is to consider that objects are important. The whole reason we're keeping objects is because they're important to people. So people having access to those objects and people having the authority to say what happens to those objects is a shift I think we're seeing to some degree in conservation. You said does it have to do somewhat with the kind of object it is, right. I'll give you an example of a Chilkat robe. This is a kind of a Northwest Coast Indigenous weaving technology. We have maybe ten or twelve of these Chilkat robes in the collection. We wanted to put one on display in the new gallery of our museum and it had some loses and some damage that as a conservator, I could follow the protocols of object conservation and textile conservation, stabilize the loose parts. I could use hair silk and tie up the loose threads and whatnot. I could mock up little faux areas to kind of hide the loses. There is a protocol in the conservation guidebook so to speak of how to do that. But instead, we brought in a Chilkat weaver and allowed her to have her way with that robe in terms of how she felt it was appropriate to repair that robe. She did things that would not be possible for me as a conservator in my standards and ethics of how I was taught to do conservation. There were certain elements that were original that she removed and replaced. The reasons that she did that had more to do with if the object were to be ceremonially used, which is possible. Sometimes there are things in the museum collection that do go out into the community and are used ceremonially. Then the robe would move and be worn and behave in appropriate ways. So this was a real eye-opener for me and I had a lot of heartburn about it. Like, did I do the right thing in allowing as my authority as a museum person, the changes to

happen to this artifact? But she has authority too as a weaver, as a member of that culture, to do those changes. In my confusion and insecurity about what had happened, I asked her if she would write a paper with me for the Alaska Journal of Anthropology. Because I had this agenda that I wanted to write down what I thought was going on and have her read it and tell me where I was understanding or misunderstanding what had happened. So that's an example of an object that you could approach from two different ways of doing research and doing treatment on it, but it's the same object.

Soon Kai Poh: I really like that you brought up this notion of authority and as it is tied to people and obviously that things matter to us because people are connected and intrinsically tied to things. I'm really interested in how you respond to the place and the context and of perhaps the geographical context in which you work. How is it different perhaps with your training in New York City and your current location in Juneau?

Ellen Carrlee: Right. So Juneau is the capital of Alaska, but there's only 30,000 people that live here and there's no roads in and out. It's off the road system. The thing about being in this place, being in Juneau, Alaska on Lingít Aani, Juneau, Alaska is the home of the Tlingit people, a Northwest Coast native group. Downtown Juneau in particular is Áak’w K̲wáan territory, so the Tlingit people have moieties, two halves of the culture. The Wooshkeetaan clan here is the eagle half and the Laayaneidí raven half, is the other clan. So downtown Juneau, where the Alaska State Museum has been since 1900 in right on their land. There's a special responsibility to get it right in the backyard of the people who have been here for 10,000 years. There was a time I looked out my front window and the carver of the totem pole that I was restoring was getting out of the car to take a look at what I had been working on. This kind of thing is very intimate and kind of tied up with one's personal life. So there's this extra emphasis on getting it right in the backyard of the people who have been here for time in memorial.

Soon Kai Poh: I guess I'm also struck by sort of this closeness that you've just described with the people who have made these things. I think today in our world and as we're conducting this podcast digitally, there's such promise in technology and the possibilities of virtualization and how that could open up all these new avenues for interpretation but also for display and what it means for perhaps even ownership of things. So I was hoping to hear your thoughts a little on what you see are the implications of these developments in the field of conservation and what do you think are the opportunities that are yet to be discovered?

Ellen Carrlee: A couple of thoughts on this notion of distance delivery and virtual potential. One of them that we've heard about for a while is what they call visual repatriation. So after the NAGPRA legislation in 1989, 1990, a lot of things got returned to communities. But there were a lot of things that didn't get returned to communities. Sometimes those things would come as temporary exhibits or in publications or there were other ways that these things were so called visually repatriated. For quite some time I thought that was a real cop-out. That it was just an excuse not to give people their stuff back. I think there is still an element of that in museum practice, which is problematic. But there is something to be said for people being able to see

the stuff that's in museums. There are times that maybe communities or folks don't necessarily need to have the thing and it can be something of a challenge to have something if you don't have a museum to keep it in. I mean, museums do certain things really well in terms of preservation. The controlled environment and security and insurance and all these things that not everybody has. I think that the images that museums right now are putting on the internet tend to be the kind of glossy publication images, or maybe sometimes with a smaller institution you get the snapshot, like report thing from the database. But, the things that artists and practitioners who make these things, or use these things often want to see is what does the back look like? What do the seams look like? How did they do the joints? How did they do the corners? What are the areas of damage and that nitty gritty of the physicality of the details of the objects. I think that we could be doing more to put those kinds of things out there for people.

Soon Kai Poh: That's really interesting. In some ways sort of stepping back from the virtual and returning to the analog as it were, returning to the material, that we're starting to realize that it's not just, as you say, about the images, it's about the physicality. It's about the touch. It's about the spirituality of some of these things. I guess, to me it reminds me of how in recent decades there has been what has been otherwise described as a material turn in the humanities and social sciences, in recognizing that things are as much a part of stories just as people are. Some have called this a social material order. As someone who works so closely with materials, you mentioned gut at the very beginning of our conversation, on the one hand, and then with also with people and with communities that make these materials and that really keep them alive, how do you see this sort of shift in the humanities, or I guess, as a conservator and also in the field of conservation?

Ellen Carrlee: I think that this shift and the questions and opportunities that have come up with this so-called material turn are part of why I decided to do the PhD in anthropology instead of in conservation or material science or something like that. Because I felt like there were ways that anthropologists had been engaging with people about their stuff that I wanted to get in on and figure out like anthropologists have been doing this for a couple of hundred years and have been messing up in all kinds of profound ways for a long time. But some of the anthropological theory ideas that I was trying to bring back into my conservation practice, I'll kind of rattle off a couple of them for you. One of them is just this idea of network thinking. Like actor network theory that's associated with Bruno Latour for example. The idea that you could have people and objects and plants and animals all as agential actors that have these back and forth relationships in this big web of relationships. So I find that to be like a really powerful idea. You'd mentioned I think materiality a while ago. The idea that objects influence people as much as people influence things. That was powerful to me. The question of whether objects have agency. I love that question intellectually. Where I am at right now, it doesn't necessarily really matter, but asking the question itself is really, really important, because different people think of it in different ways. Alfred Gell, I don't know if you've dealt with him a whole lot, but the idea that the object is an index that carries somebody else's agency. One of my favorite, favorite concepts right now is this idea of the gift, Marcel Mauss, that objects kind of circulate around

and have a spirit or a memory that goes around with them when people are giving or receiving or reciprocating with objects this kind of travels around with it and animates the network, keeps it alive. This network of relationships keeps people in connection with each other and with objects and with animals. But here is kind of the kicker with Mauss, I think, is that this idea of the gift, the spirit in the gift, is actually this Maori concept called Hau, H-A-U. And Mauss got it from an anthropologist who had been writing letters with a Maori intellectual, his name is Tamati Ranapiri, I think. So it's really an Indigenous concept and anthropologists have been accused of taking these really great ideas from other cultures Indigenous cultures and non-Eurocentric cultures and appropriating them for themselves and putting their names on them. I think this goes back to the idea of authority and who gets to stay and making space at the table for various kinds of stakeholders who care about these objects to come to the table and have a voice and have authority to get to say why we're keeping this stuff and for who.

Soon Kai Poh: Would you then say that in some ways this parses your role as a conservator into one that's really a mediator of relationships between not just peoples, but peoples and things, and maybe things and things?

Ellen Carrlee: Yeah.

Soon Kai Poh: I'm not sure if I'm complicating it even further, but whether you would characterize it in that way.

Ellen Carrlee: Crystal clear, yeah. I really think about it in those ways now, about mediating. I mean, remember when I think we both went to the same training program at NYU and I definitely was inculcated with this idea that conservation is a three legged stool. So the three legs are science, particularly chemistry, art history or anthropology, to understand why things are important, and then studio art, so we kind of understood how material properties really physically worked. And that we somehow were bringing together these three different disciplines or fields in order to advocate for the object. So in that way I think we were trained from the beginning in a field of conservation to be a mediator. But I think that we didn't get trained to think about objects as being important because they're important to people. So I think it's a little bit new for conservators to be thinking about that role.

Soon Kai Poh: So you sort of prefaced this already for me, but now I'm really curious, from your perspective, where do you think that the future of conservation lies?

Ellen Carrlee: So many exciting possibilities when we open up the idea of who gets to say what changes might happen to artifacts over time. How much change or alteration is important? Are we using up an artifact right now with consumptive use or are we saving it for 500 years for someone's use in the future? I think that for a long time conservators felt like they had some of the best answers to those questions and they had the authority to say based on their own ethics and guidelines and practice whether or not certain things should be allowed or not allowed. I think when you open up the possibility that other people belong at the table and they're authority could be more compelling, their needs to use and interact with material

culture could outweigh our needs to put them away in the collection storage room in the dark, in climate control and whatnot. I think we're going to, I hope, see in museum practice, more flexibility, particularly with marginalized and oppressed and colonized communities. I think there's a real special responsibility there because of the legacy of problematic interactions that museums have been founded on in the past. The practices where things get loaned out only to other museums that have controlled climates and security and all that sort of stuff, I think that the possibility to put objects back into circulation among their communities for all the wellness and possibilities of healing and self-determination that come with having access to your material culture, I think that we might see more activities that instead of putting time and effort and energy towards a big blockbuster summer exhibit for a certain audience, could that time and effort and energy and money be put toward sending a group of objects to their home community to be used and then brought back? I mean, that's an expensive thing too. Loans and shipping and that sort of thing, but who are we preserving these things for and why and what role could conservators have in helping those access possibilities happen?

Soon Kai Poh: You sort of alluded to this a little bit at the end and I'm wondering if you feel that in some ways were the actions of conservators or were conservation practice made more visible as part of the museum apparatus, if you will, that there would be more possibilities in this direction?

Ellen Carrlee: We sometimes see windows into conservation labs and those sorts of things your conservator is trying to do treatments in the galleries. We do see some of those kinds of making the invisible visible kind of thing. Tying to the question of source communities and conservation treatment, when I was first coming out of school twenty years ago, there was definitely a sense with conservators that conservation treatments and how we do it and the materials we use would be very openly discussed and shared with other conservators, but not with the unwashed masses of the general public who might view it wrong and mess up material culture. I think that there might be a way to move away from that secrecy in a way. I'll give an example of basket conservation treatments. The ones that involved the little splints of Japanese tissue that are put on in large quantities across warps and wefts of damaged baskets and then put on with wheat starch paste and then meticulously painted out under magnification with tiny, tiny paint brushes. It's a really elegant beautiful invisible conservation treatment when it's done and it's not that complicated of a treatment, it's just really time consuming. So I have done this kind of treatment on a great number of baskets, and baskets are an important part of our collection here, because spruce root and cedar bark baskets are made very actively here on the Northwest Coast and they've been made for hundreds if not thousands of years. I thought, why couldn't weavers be empowered to do these treatments, because sometimes the amount of time that it would take a conservator to do a museum quality conservation treatment on a basket might be pretty close to the market value of the basket. But still, these are very special items for people in their families, in their clans, in the community as well as in museum collections. Why couldn't someone with the hand skills to put these repairs on? And it's completely reversible, it's wheat starch paste, right? So, I taught a class specifically for spruce root weavers at the Alaska State Museum. Here's how we do these repairs. We had baskets

that were in our study collection. I had little sets of tweezers and wheat starch paste for everybody and we're doing these repairs and it isn't just the vessel of the basket that gets made here, it's also these really amazing hats that get made out of spruce root and cedar bark. The weavers were like, "Yeah, these are nice repairs if something is going to be on the mantel or on the shelf at home, but if we're going to wear them out in the rainforest here in Juneau, Alaska, these repairs are useless, they're going to fall off." It's not practical for the ongoing cultural use of these objects. So could we dampen and humidify these baskets and splint them with sympathetic materials? They were going in a totally new direction with the treatment protocol, which then got me thinking. So it's this exciting possibility that opens up if people are empowered to interact with their material culture. So by making what we do visible and sharing, we're also making all these potentials for taking care of material culture possible.

Soon Kai Poh: You've described a huge array of activities that almost seems like five different jobs at once. To you, I guess, what is your sense of the future conservator and how will they be equipped to do this work?

Ellen Carrlee: Well just the same way that the museum profession has specializations. You've got textile conservators and paper conservators and paintings conservators. Nobody is expected to know it all. In the same way the practice, the actions of how we are doing our work, not everyone is going to come to those practices with the same strengths and the same affordances and the same resources. So while I feel like my practice in the backyard of the Tlingit people gives me maybe more opportunity to have these networks of relationships and give people access to their stuff and have conversations with them and empower them to do the preservation activities that might have once seemed only the purview of museums. I have realms of conservation that I'm very weak in partly because I'm in this kind of isolated place. I have got a portable XRF that I just barely can get qualitative data out of, because I only use it a few times a year. The vast majority of my photo documentation happens with an iPhone I keep in my back pocket. So there's some institutions where imaging and sharing all kinds of really elaborate information that comes from imaging technologies and analytical devices could be somebody else's strength, but it can't be my strength where I am, at the institution where I work. I think too, when we look at what's going on in private practice, a bit of what we're talking about here is this kind of privileged field of people who are working in institutions. I think there's definitely a shift since I came out of school with how many people are in private practice and what sorts of things that you can be doing and what projects you can be taking on and the kind of conservator you can be if you're in private practice. I think if we do have networks of relationships and various people on the team and various people on the table, it makes space for those conservators too.

Soon Kai Poh: Thank you, Ellen. That's really inspiring and thank you for speaking with us today.

Ellen Carrlee: Soon Kai, it's been so great to be here and I've really enjoyed this conversation. I really enjoy the connection that we're able to have over the miles.

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