

Eleonora Nagy (MAC 1991), Conservator of Three-Dimensional Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and Conservator in Private Practice, Modern Sculpture Conservation LLC

Interviewed by Caroline Savage (MAC 2015)

Eleonora Nagy graduated in 1984 from the Hungarian Academy of Fine Art, Budapest, with her M.F.A. and a specialization in sculpture. She then immigrated to Canada and completed her Master's of Art Conservation at Queen's University in 1991. She went on to work at the Centre de Conservation du Quebec, and the Canadian Conservation Institute. In 1995 she joined the Conservation Department of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as assistant sculpture conservator. She is currently the conservator of three-dimensional art at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and runs her private practice, Modern Sculpture Conservation LLC. As with most successful conservators, her interests in the materiality of sculptures are broad and unbounded, her determination is inspiring, and her love of a challenge is well suited to her treatment of a great range of minimalist artists' materials.

Q You are well known in the community for your work, and I've been looking into your interests and your career. There seems to be a focus on the works of Donald Judd, and his foundation specifically. Could you discuss a particular project that you are proud of that has had a national or international impact?

A I have been working on Judds and treating Judds for twenty years and when I began there wasn't a lot of information about the treatment of his works available. Many of the treatments had involved cleaning the works. I had a traditional approach to lacquered surfaces applied to metal.

Q Were the lacquers usually applied to a mirror finish metal surface or another type of material?

A The lacquers can be applied to any surface, not necessarily only metal. Judd often used them on galvanized surfaces. Part of why they come off so easily is because Judd wanted to show the metal underneath, so he treated the lacquer as a modification of the original material. He said he consciously omitted basic procedures that the manufacturer planned. When trying to paint metal you have to clean the metal. I found methods to consolidate, repair and refinish the metal surface. In some cases the lacquer had been completely removed and I had to go to the original source to find more, only to learn that it was not being manufactured anymore. So after research, I succeeded in remaking the original piece in the original colour; basically the piece got re-authenticated, which is a topic of discussion of theoretical issues. Similarly, I am trying to keep the original material of some of Judd's metal pieces. I clean what I can. If it breaks up I source a contemporary material, which is not then contemporary art. There are, however, still a few places where you can place a special order.

A specific case concerned Dan Flavin's lightning fluorescent tubes. They could not be obtained anymore, and there had to be a special order. In two cases, I have gone that route. You have to have significant funding to do it, but it is possible. In some cases, not even the factory knows how to produce them anymore and that is a very difficult situation. In two other cases we were successful in sourcing the original material. In at least one of the cases we managed to take out the dents when thin sheet metal had had an impact but usually it is impossible because some changes remain. We succeeded - this was a big part of the conservation. An automated computerized piece of 20-ton machinery was used and we gave a talk at a conference about our

experience. What we achieved improved the piece to a condition where it was able to go on exhibition and the original polish was maintained.

I like the challenges. Calder's works and contemporary works in general have very unusual issues. I find it challenging and sometimes scary. In Europe, I had done a lot of work on baroque pieces. It was our daily bread, and I didn't find it that challenging. When I do the contemporary pieces I feel I am flying blind. It can be sometimes scary but very rewarding.

Q You are well versed in metals, what types of materials were used in the piece that you worked on by Claes Oldenburg?

A It was one of his large ice bags. It was giant, motorized, and very complex piece: three times your height, 4 m wide, three motors with combinations of fiberglass. Sometimes when you treat in an emergency, you don't even know what you are treating. It goes to that extreme, because you just have to make do in two hours, while some projects may go on for two years when you don't know how to resolve it. This is true for conservation in general. Anyone who is in contemporary art conservation, I think, is in it because of the thrill of it. In the case of Medieval art or classical Renoirs, you can just deal with the oil paints.

Q Has there been a particular person in the field of conservation that you feel has been particularly helpful, or mentored you in any way that was meaningful?

A I have to say that Queen's mentored me tremendously. I arrived in Canada as a refugee who could barely speak English. I went there out of the blue. Ian Hodkinson and Krysia Spirydowicz, who were there, told me they were very much interested in taking me. I went into the program partly because of Ian and Krysia and partly because my Hungarian training, though very thorough in understanding the materials and ethics, did not give us any exposure to scientific analysis. Both Ian and Krysia made me apply on the spot and take chemistry and they sent me to take the Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) test. I failed the total test. Ian looked at my report cards from Hungary and took them to the music department, where a professor who was Hungarian translated them. After speaking with him, Ian didn't care about the test results.

Believe it or not, at first I couldn't take notes in lectures. Imagine being in the lectures with Krysia and not understanding what was being discussed. When the other students realized I didn't understand, they gave me their notes. I would take these notes to the library to translate and once I had finished translating them, it would be time for another lecture. I had a hard time but I learned a lot. Krysia is a very good teacher, and very organized. The people formed a tight group which supported everybody. I hope it is still like that today.

Before Queen's University I had never seen a computer in my life. The Hungarian University had 400 students, and two typewriters, one for the Director's secretary, and one for all other office work.

In the Queen's program 10 reports were due within the first two weeks. By the end of the year, I spoke English and I finished the reports without failing anything. I got tremendous support from the whole program. Later on Derek Pullen, head of the conservation department at the Tate, supported and encouraged me a lot. I enjoyed my time at CCI, but it wasn't in line with my particular direction towards contemporary art. I worked in the furniture and decorative arts department and sometimes in the paintings department because I had studied sculpture. In Europe and in Canada I did a lot of sculpture and I did a lot of architectural conservation. I had to choose between one or the other.

Q Do you have any favorite memories of Queen's University?

A I told you that when I first began, I didn't have any clue. I couldn't write things down or understand what people were saying. One of my classmates a year ahead of me was from Texas, and I couldn't understand a single word she said. She was really trying to help me and she was very nice to me. By the end of the year we were working on a project with another one of our classmates, Liz Czerwinski, who is at the Burnaby Art Gallery now. We were working on the project and discussing what to do and how. She said something including a verb I didn't understand. When I asked her what it meant she stared at me as if I was someone from the moon. That was the moment, was the minute, we both realized that I had actually learned the language. Before that I couldn't even have asked if there was a word I didn't understand. Necessity - you never know how much you can do until it is required.

Q Do you have any advice to give to students or new graduates?

A Think with your head. My experience in conservation, as with anything else, has involved other people telling me what I cannot do, or can do, or how to resolve a situation. I think it is very wise to revise this advice, not to dis-regard it, but to be able to revise it all the time. Anything I have achieved or know in the field is because I always did that. I generally recommend that people apply this to ordinary life. I have been told a lot of things but you have to think it out for yourself every time.

Q What has been your career path? How did you get your current job?

A It's a long one. I started art in primary school, but nobody pays attention to that. I went to a high school that specialized in art. We had teachers who were the last generation from the end of the First World War, teaching us 19-20 traditional materials that are not taught in America. School began in September, and by October we were casting sculptures. I was trained as a 19th-century traditional plasterer, understanding the materials. I went over to the Academy to learn how to be a sculpture and also a conservator, which was a very similar training but in much more in depth. We were casting plaster, and sand casting. I learned how to carve many different kinds of stone. It was a very good education. Then I immigrated. I really had reached the ceiling in Hungary, and I needed to learn more. When you reach that lid in your early twenties, it is not realistic to stay, so I landed in Canada. I applied to go to Canada so I had to leave Hungary illegally, and I arrived as a refugee. That was the only normal way then. I ended up in Canada, in Toronto, in architectural conservation. Once I finished at Queen's, I went to the Centre de Conservation du Quebec (CCQ) and was working in the polychrome sculpture lab. CCQ couldn't continue my contract so I went to the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). I had to make sure to have a reliable income, and I very much appreciated the opportunity in the furniture and decorative arts department.

I was looking around for my next job. For a long time there was nothing then - how life teases you - I got three job offers. CCI hired me as a permanent employee; in the UK, John Ushers, head of National Heritage, needed someone with a specialization in sculpture; and the Guggenheim needed an external mural conservator. Three job offers is like a punishment! This happened in early summer, so I went to Hungary to see my parents for a few weeks and to decide what to do.

Finally, I decided to go to the Guggenheim. This is when I started working with Judds, because the Guggenheim has a lot of Judds. I ignorantly started calling around for help because I was sure that other people would have the knowledge to tell me what to do and I would be able to do it. Then I realized within a couple of days that I was on my own and I had to either sink or swim. I had to figure it out myself somehow. After that people started to ask me for advice, and that's how I

began with Judd's works. I was at the Guggenheim for 10 years, and after that I began my own company. Modern Sculpture Conservation LLC, in New York. The Whitney became my major client and after I had worked with them for many years, they asked if I would consider working full time with them. I still had my company to run, however, so I became part-time at the Whitney. I ran my company, writing some articles and basically choosing my projects. You are always working, it is a tricky balance but it is very interesting. My personal interests and my private conservation work match with the Whitney's. You have to know how to handle it.

The interview with Ms. Nagy was such a pleasure, and she has much experience, advice and patience to impart to the next generation of graduates in Art Conservation. Thank you very much for your time, and energy, it was an honour and a privilege to speak with you.