

Transformation, Persistence and Loss in Life of Artworks (Venice, 12–14 Oct 26)

Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, Oct 12–14, 2026

Deadline: Apr 26, 2026

Ester Giachetti

Matter of Time: Transformation, Persistence and Loss in the Life of Artworks.

8th International PhD Conference in History of Arts

In the history of works of art, and more broadly of human creations, the passage of time rarely implies any form of “stability”, whether material or cultural. The artworks that have come down to us are often the result of a series of transformations: deterioration, loss, restoration, remaking, reinstallation, readaptation, or reuse, all of which may alter their appearance, function, and sometimes even their meaning.

Over the last few decades, renewed interest in the materiality of objects has progressively shifted attention away from the “original” form of art objects – that is, the form conceived at the moment of their creation – toward their continued existence and the processes through which they are preserved, transformed, and transmitted. From this perspective, this conference aims to examine how material processes affecting works of art and objects – such as alteration, destruction, conservation, and exhibition practices – contribute to the reconfiguration of their identity by introducing elements of discontinuity, redefinition, or rupture. More broadly, it asks how such processes shape their capacity to endure over time.

The conference welcomes contributions addressing these issues across all historical periods and from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. The following thematic areas are intended as starting points for reflection:

Alterations, unstable materialities, and ephemeral forms

This section explores the material transformations of artworks, with particular attention to deterioration, loss – whether natural or intentional – and other forms of alteration. It also welcomes contributions on temporary forms and devices, as well as on practices in which transformation or destruction constitutes an integral element of the artwork itself: from the processional, ritual, or theatrical apparatuses of the medieval and early modern periods to contemporary artistic practices.

Movements and changing contexts

Artworks frequently move across different cultural, social, and institutional contexts. This section examines the material transformations resulting from such shifts, considering the interventions that accompany them, including additions, adaptations, and reorganizations. How do these pro-

cesses contribute to the preservation of artworks, or instead to their redefinition? Relevant topics include ritual refunctionalizations, as well as display and exhibition choices linked to the incorporation of artworks into different collecting, communal, or museum settings.

Practices of repurposing: reactivation and conservation

This section addresses the role of conservation and restoration, as well as processes such as replication, reconstruction, and the reactivation of theatrical or performative devices. Such cases invite reflection on the relationship between the preservation of an original state and the transformative processes through which an artwork may continue to exist, even as it sustains losses and undergoes transformations in the forms of its transmission and reception, including within collective historical memory.

Epistemological perspectives

If we acknowledge that artworks undergo material transformations over time, it becomes necessary to question the categories through which they are described and interpreted. This section invites reflection on the methodological implications of a process-oriented understanding of the work of art, challenging notions such as authenticity, integrity, and originality, and reconsidering the theoretical tools used by art history and the humanities to approach objects whose identity is constituted through change.

Participation Guidelines

The conference is open to all PhD candidates and to early-career researchers who have obtained their doctoral degree no more than three years before the conference date. Those interested in participating are invited to submit a proposal for a 20-minute presentation, in either English or Italian, to the following address: arts.phdconference@unive.it

Submission deadline: 26 April 2026

Notification of acceptance: 11 May 2026

Conference languages: English and Italian

Proposals must include the following:

- name and surname
- contact details (e-mail address and telephone number)
- academic affiliation
- provisional title
- abstract (maximum 400 words)
- curriculum vitae (maximum 150 words)

Applicants are asked to combine all materials into a single PDF file, named according to the following format: *SurnameName_Title*

(for example: Dimmick_Lawrence Architectural Elements of Space Identity).

The conference will take place in a hybrid format. While in-person participation will be preferred, the organizing committee will also consider requests to present remotely.

There is no registration fee; however, participants will be expected to cover their own travel and accommodation expenses.

The conference proceedings are planned for publication. Submission of a written version of the paper for publication is optional and is not a condition for participation. Further information will be communicated to selected participants.

Reference:

CFP: Transformation, Persistence and Loss in Life of Artworks (Venice, 12-14 Oct 26). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 20, 2026 (accessed Mar 21, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52038>>.