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Stigter, S.

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Revista de História da Arte - Série W

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Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

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Citation for published version (APA):

Stigter, S. (2015). Co-Producing Conceptual Art: A Conservator's Testimony. *Revista de História da Arte - Série W*, 4, 103-114. <http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAW4.pdf>

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CO-PRODUCING CONCEPTUAL ART: A CONSERVATOR'S TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

Installing a conceptual artwork together with the artist may shift the role of the conservator to that of co-producer. This enforces a critical reflection on the notion of art conservation and the function of documentation. During the materialization of Jan Dibbets' variable installation *All shadows that occurred to me in... are marked with tape* (1969), valuable information was gained, but also constructed as part of the interview conducted while installing the work together. When documenting this participatory practice, a critical point arises because the dynamics on the floor turn static in documents, losing the context of time and place, action and reaction. By emphasising critical reflections *in* documentation, on both the dialogue with the artist and the mediation of the artwork's physical form, adopting an autoethnographic approach, the artwork could be transmitted to the future *by* documentation in a more transparent way. I propose a "conservator's testimony" to provide this transparency.¹

KEYWORDS

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY | ARTIST INTERVIEW | ARTIST PARTICIPATION | CONSERVATION DOCUMENTATION | PERSONAL TESTIMONY

RESUMO

Instalar uma obra de arte concetual com o artista pode deslocar o papel do conservador para o de coprodutor o que obriga a uma reflexão crítica sobre a noção de conservação e a função da documentação. Durante a materialização da instalação variável de Jan Dibbet, *All shadows that occurred to me in ... are marked with tape* (1969), informação valiosa foi obtida, mas também construída, resultante da entrevista efetuada durante a instalação conjunta da obra. Quando se documenta esta atividade participada, surge a questão crítica de uma ação dinâmica se tornar estática nos documentos, perdendo-se o contexto do tempo e do lugar, ação e reação. Enfatizando reflexões críticas *na* documentação, quer no que respeita ao diálogo com o artista, quer no que se refere à mediação da forma física do objeto, adotando uma abordagem autoetnográfica, a obra pode ser transmitida *pela* documentação, de forma mais transparente. Proponho um "testemunho do conservador" para providenciar essa transparência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

AUTOETNOGRAFIA | ENTREVISTA AO ARTISTA | PARTICIPAÇÃO DO ARTISTA | DOCUMENTAÇÃO DA CONSERVAÇÃO | TESTEMUNHO PESSOAL



Introduction

Seemingly small choices made during the materialization of variable conceptual artworks are crucial for the final result, yet rarely recorded since documentation practices generally start after a work is finalized. However, crucial information can be obtained during the process of materialization, especially when performed together with the artist. During this participatory practice data are not only collected, but also generated; the artwork's form is explored in dialogue and shaped as part of mutual activities, driven by the given circumstances. When these dynamics are to be captured in documentation, the chance exists that this fixes the informal and adaptive character of the artwork, which may limit the freedom of future executions.² This demonstrates the ambiguous role of documentation, since it can only partly reflect the practices it refers to, whereas documentation is readily used as a source for guidelines to reinstall artworks. The question then is, what kind of documentation best acknowledges personal input and ensures the continuation of the artwork according to its concept?

Living Record and Personal Testimony

Conservators are trained to keep possible interference at a minimum, including when conducting artist interviews. We ask open questions, keep silent, and reflect on the co-constructed source afterwards (Portelli 2003; Saaze 2009a; Beerkens et al. 2012). Nonetheless, challenging situations occur when working with artists. Conservators have addressed the issue that artists change opinion over time (Stigter 2004), have recognized that the outcome of

the interview influences decision-making (Gardener et al. 2008), and have put forward the possible conflict of interest between the artist and the conservator (Sommermeyer 2011). This illustrates that the artwork's possible future appearance is being constructed, either in an interview or on the floor while installing a work, and when engaging with the artist or not, because of the fact that always choices are made.³ Thus, not only are interviews co-constructed, variable conceptual artworks are too, since they have to be materialised by someone. They are living records of joint input.

To reveal what happens during the process of producing an artwork's manifestation, I would like to introduce a "conservator's testimony," a personal account of the influence of interactions between stakeholders and contextual input, and the way the artwork is being perceived during conversations, participatory practices, conservation treatments, and reinstallation practices. Generally conservators do not include reflective personal experience when working with the artwork in conservation treatment reports, because they are supposed to act as neutral mediators. However, conceptual artworks may demand actions that have a bigger impact on the artwork's appearance than is the case for traditional artworks. A testimony will acknowledge individual input and will provide reflection upon all practices surrounding the materialisation of the artwork, revealing the interplay of dynamics that shape its final appearance.

To study the artwork as a living record while acknowledging personal input, I will adopt an autoethnographical approach, a qualitative research method based on ethnography and tailored to study one's

¹ This article is based on my forthcoming PhD thesis *Between Concept and Material: Working with Conceptual Art — A Conservator's Testimony* at the University of Amsterdam.

² On the influence of documentation on installation artworks, see also Irvin 2006.

³ For various ways of working with artists, see Huys 2012.

own practices.⁴ Rather than the analytical approach of an outsider, helped by archival research as adopted by Irvin (2006), for example, or that of a silent observer during the practice of installation in the manner of Yaneva (2003a + b) and Van Saaze (2009b, 2013), I aim to present a critical reflection upon my own role as the museum's conservator "doing" the artwork.⁵ I will draw from my experience of working with artist Jan Dibbets on his variable artwork *All shadows that occurred to me in.....are marked with tape* from 1969, hereafter referred to as *All shadows...*⁶

In my dual role as both conservator and researcher, I had to shift between insider as museum professional and outsider as a participant observer. The autoethnographic approach makes this insightful and demonstrates that a complex artwork is never reinstalled in a neutral way, but depends upon choices, and often upon choices that are made on the spot. This implies that a subjective approach is incorporated into conservation practice, whereas this is never really articulated in current forms of documentation. This deserves more attention because when a variable artwork is correctly installed, it could be considered conserved for that moment as having progressed in time. The installation enters the public eye in this form. The choices, adaptations and alterations that are made should be made explicit to conserve the work's essence, because every installation moment becomes part of the artwork's biography, further shaping its identity (Vall et al. 2011).

All shadows that occurred to... me?

All shadows... is a crucial work in the oeuvre of Jan Dibbets (1941 Weert), one of the most important conceptual artists

from the Netherlands. In 1969 he realised the work for the first time in Haus Lange, Krefeld (fig. 1). This was at a pivotal moment in his career when he had just started working with photography. Even though *All shadows...* is created in a completely different medium, it clearly illustrates Dibbets' fascination for light and time. *All shadows...* consists of lines of masking tape on the walls and the floor in an architectural setting, marking sunlit areas in successive stages. In combination with the actual real shadows in the room, one will notice a difference with the taped ones. *All shadows...* is a pattern of after images; new shadows will never hit the exact same spot again (fig. 2). This makes the viewer aware of their own presence in time and space, which was exactly Dibbets' intention. "As a visual artist I am trying to change our spatial experience," he stated in 1969, stressing the impact of the work as a spatial intervention.⁷

The more than 40-year-old artwork still challenges the foundations of art conservation because it is physically destroyed after each exhibition and then waits to be reinterpreted again for the next show. Moreover, *All shadows...* varies according to time and place, which is illustrated by its exhibition history. The first instalment in Krefeld took over 5 days.⁸ This was reduced to one-day sessions at the Paris and Milan affiliations of Galerie Lambert in 1970.⁹ A full decade later Dibbets used the principle on a freestanding wall for the exhibition 'Murs' in Centre George Pompidou in 1981.¹⁰ The work was then left dormant for almost a quarter of a century, until it was requested for an exhibition in Kassel in 2005.¹¹ This time Dibbets delegated the making process. The event must have awakened the work in the eyes of the artist, because the following year

⁴ On autoethnography see Ellis, Adams, Bochner (2011). For argumentation for the use of autoethnography to investigate research practices see Duncan (2007).

⁵ The notion of 'doing artworks' is borrowed from Vivian van Saaze (2009b).

⁶ The complete title is to be filled out according to time and place. Dibbets provided the museum with the title in Dutch upon acquisition, *Alle schaduwen die mij zijn opgevallen in zijn afgeplakt met tape*, which was registered by the museum accordingly. The title has been expressed in different languages and varied over time, see Stigter 2014.

⁷ Weijers 1969, s.p. All translations to English by author.

⁸ See Wember and Dibbets 1969, s.p.

⁹ The Paris iteration is falsely assumed to be the first one in Moure et al. 2004, 251, 532.

¹⁰ Depicted in the accompanying catalogue (Pacquement 1981, s.p.).

¹¹ The exhibition catalogue shows the early Paris iteration (Moure et al. 2004, 251).

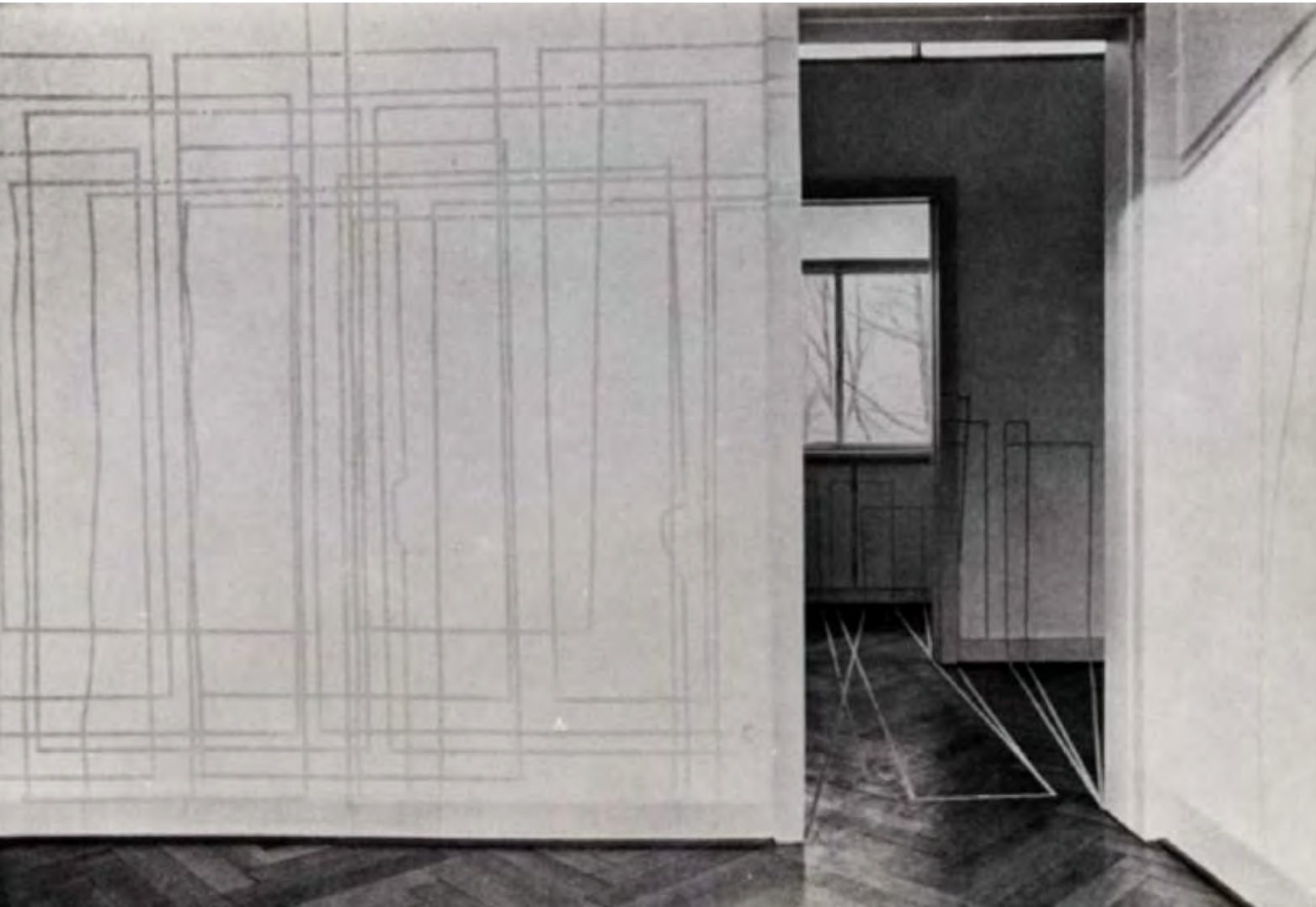


FIG. 1 Jan Dibbets, *All shadows...* in Krefeld 1969, entitled: *Markierung van Lichteinfallen und Schattenbetrachtungen durch Klebeband an den Wänden und auf dem Fußboden eines Raumes im Museum Haus Lange Ausgeführt von 8 bis 12 Dezember 1969*. Haus Lange. Document KM 131.364-1c, depicted in: Wember and Dibbets, s.p..

Dibbets himself produced a small floor version of *All shadows...* for the sculpture biennale in Carrara in 2006.¹²

In 2007 I became involved in the life of *All shadows...* when Dibbets recounted that the work had never entered a collection.¹³ He later remembered that the work could have been sold to famous art collector Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, who acquired Dibbets' entire show at Lambert in Milan in 1970 — over the phone.¹⁴ The gallery owner failed to describe the shadow piece to Panza, clearly not considering it a sellable work at the time, probably because of its informal quality and temporal nature. This provided the Kröller-Müller

Museum the opportunity to acquire *All shadows...* nearly 40 years later, taking up the challenge of managing the work.¹⁵

A conceptual artwork, such as *All shadows...*, turns traditional museum practices completely upside down. The title alone is already provocative, discharging the idea of authorship because of the personal pronoun in it: *All shadows that occurred to me...* This must refer to the artist. However, Dibbets made clear that his involvement in materializing the work is not imperative at all.¹⁶ But could the artwork really be determined by the shadows that occurred to *me*?



FIG. 2 Jan Dibbets, *All shadows...* detail. Masking tape, dimensions variable. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 131.297. All photographs by author, Kröller-Müller Museum, April 10, 2009, unless noted otherwise.

¹² For a detailed account of the artwork's exhibition history, see Stigter 2014.

¹³ Dibbets, audio recorded interview by author, April 6 2007, Kröller-Müller Museum archive.

¹⁴ Dibbets, video recorded interview by author, November 11, 2011. Conservation archive University of Amsterdam and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

¹⁵ Acquired with support from the Mondriaan Fund.

¹⁶ Dibbets, see note 13.

With the commission to re-install *All shadows...* from scratch, I seemed to be entering a zone of creativity, something that is normally restricted to the artist or authorised assistants. This forced me to reflect upon my own role, because how can *production* become part of *conservation*? There are no established guidelines for this part of the profession. Outsiders such as Yaneva, Irvin and Van Saaze observed that museums have had a hand in shaping complex artworks, but what this means for the role and responsibilities of the art conservator is not discussed.¹⁷ Insiders, conservators at least, are reluctant to acknowledge that they are steering artworks, because their role usually aims at minimal intervention, holding them back from interfering in the first place.¹⁸

However, the ephemeral as well as variable character of *All shadows...* requires conservators to actively perform the work, because it evokes fundamental questions about what it is that needs to be conserved, and on how the artwork should be transmitted to the future. After all, when the work is not exhibited, there is nothing tangible left but documentation. Preparatory research from archival material, provides just half of the information that is needed compared to what could be learned from the actual instalment of the artwork, especially when in cooperation with the artist. In contrast with more conventional artworks that preferably do not change, *All shadows...* is in flux and should be progressed in time. To find out how this process takes shape I look at precisely these process-based activities, documenting them by means of a personal testimony, being both witness and participant at the same time, becoming part of the living record.¹⁹

Preparations and Choices

The sale transaction of *All shadows...* consisted of an exchange of documents.²⁰ By way of transferring guidelines, Dibbets offered his help for the first instalment of the work. Then director of the Kröller-Müller Museum Evert van Straaten discussed possible sites for installation in the museum together with the artist. A gallery with small upright windows was chosen. However, Dibbets made clear that the work is by no means restricted to this site. The lines could even be applied in various rooms at the same time; according to Van Straaten's notes, "we are the owner and could even tape around the whole museum. Dibbets allowed a maximum of freedom, and he especially advised not to be too precise in carrying out the work. No problem when the sun moves too fast and you forget a line."²¹

It took more than a year to find the right moment to install the work, largely due to the relatively poor weather in the Netherlands. Sunny weather is definitely essential for the making process. For the other ingredients I was commissioned to buy ordinary masking tape and small snap knives at the hardware store. This sounds simple, but the truth is that the process of making choices now continued independent of the artist. The store I picked was close to my home at that time and it carried the brand Tesa, of which I chose type Classic. This was slightly more expensive and made me believe that it offered better workability and longer durability. Furthermore, I could choose between 19 mm and 25 mm in width and I chose the first, according to what I understood as the ordinary type. Dibbets confirmed this was indeed the correct material.

¹⁷ Instead, the function of the museum is discussed. Yaneva 2003, Irvin 2006, Saaze 2009b.

¹⁸ On a conservator's deliberations on steering an artwork's appearance, see Stigter 2011, especially 78-79.

¹⁹ The term testimony is used in the sense that it is used in oral history, producing life stories by personal testimonies. It should not be confused with a testimony in court, cut short of cause and context. A conservator's testimony is understood as a personal account and thorough analyses of the context in which the research material is brought together, studied, interpreted and translated into practical measures, including critical reflections on conclusions and research findings.

²⁰ The invoice is catalogued as certificate, KM 131.363, and the rest as documentation, KM 131.364, both specified as related objects to the artwork.

²¹ Evert van Straaten, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2008.

These details may seem of minor importance; indeed, they were never explicated before, yet it is this material that will determine the artwork's final appearance. By meticulously describing the first phase of preparation, I aim to point out that when in charge of managing a conceptual artwork such as this, choices are made before you know it. Already the first phase in the art-making process is out of the artist's hands and determined by third parties co-producing the work's physical appearance: the artist as the initial creator, the museum director in allocating a site, and the museum conservator in gathering materials and assisting with the work's materialisation. The installation of artworks is generally not recognized as a collaborative process, whereas for the purpose of conservation it is important to distinguish between the artist's hand and the input of others when one wants to remain conscious of who is actually shaping what in each iteration of the artwork. Hence, my suggestion for a conservator's testimony.

Dialogue and Negotiation

For the materialization of *All shadows...* Dibbets asked for two people who could work with their hands because he claimed to have two left hands himself. I and contemporary art conservator Evelyne Snijders became Dibbets' right hands. Some time before, I had observed the sun entering the room around 8.30 a.m., and Dibbets appointed this the moment to start. However, on the morning of April 10, 2009 there was no sun to be seen; therefore we started with an interview instead.²² When the sun gradually appeared, Dibbets immediately marked the first sunny spot on the wall with tape. First his wife Kaayk, who joined us every now and

then, helped unwind tape from the roll, while Dibbets tore off the right length and adhered it to the wall, along the borders of the projected light (figs. 3a-c). Then the sun vanished.

When the sun reappeared, the light entered through several windows at once and a very hectic working process started. We had to work quickly, not only in case the sun disappeared again, but especially because of its rapid movement (fig. 4). Whereas we had started marking each of the sunlit areas individually, the art-making process gradually became more systematic. We learned by doing that it was more efficient to tape the top and bottom of a whole row of projected windows in one go. A quick pencil mark on the tape indicated the spot for the risers and where the excess of tape could be cut away. This procedure guaranteed a structure with straight lines, a feature that became significant of this iteration (fig. 5).

Two artworks by Carl Andre exhibited in the same room also influenced the artwork's appearance (fig. 6). They were left in place at Dibbets' request. We stopped taping where the wooden sculptures stood and continued behind them as if the lines ran through underneath the sculptures. However, the shadows of the sculptures themselves were not marked with tape. This observation made me believe that I could set a guideline — namely that only architectural features determine the areas to be taped, which was also true for the latest executions of the work. When I asked about it, Dibbets confirmed my assumption at first.

JD: "It is simply about the shadows that enter the room. And this piece also makes a shadow, but we are not going to include that. It just has to be the wall and the floor".

²² All communication during the installation process is recorded with a digital voice recorder by lack of a video camera that day. All produced documents are filed in the conservation archive of the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



FIGS. 3a-c. Jan and Kaayk Dibbets started the making process of *All shadows...*



FIG. 4 Jan Dibbets with conservators during the installation of *All shadows...* Photo: Toos van Kooten / Kröller-Müller Museum.

FIG. 5 Jan Dibbets, *All shadows that occurred to me in the Kröller-Müller Museum on Good Friday 2009, 1969, 2009.*

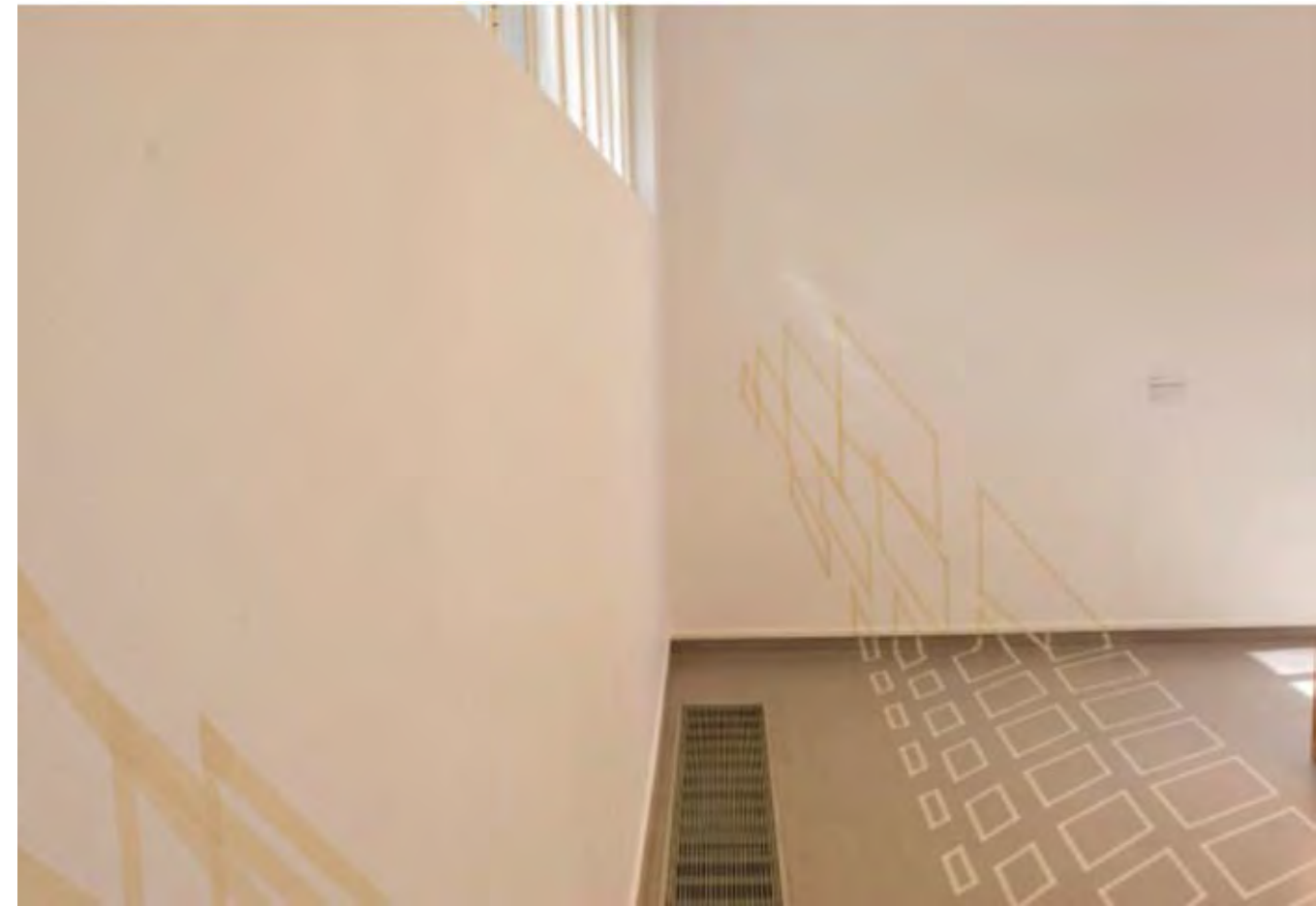


FIG. 6 Jan Dibbets' *All shadows...* 1969, 2009, and Carl Andre, *Philemon* and *Boucis*, both 1981, western red cedar. 92,5 x 93 x 92 cm. and 91 x 91 x 91 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum.

SS: "So the architecture..."

JD: "The architecture determines the form and not what is in the room. Chairs and all have nothing to do with it. So you imagine the room empty. If it would contain a desk you would tape until there and then you continue."

SS: "So whatever the windows dictate?"

JD: "Yes."²³

Perhaps I forced the artist to set a guideline at this point, while the 1981 execution did include shadows of nearby sculptures. However, Dibbets considers this version the least successful.²⁴ I could easily use this pronouncement to defend the architectural parameter we had just formulated. Yet, I reflect on it instead to provide transparency on my double role as conservator / co-producer with the responsibility to be neutral, anxious to manipulate the artwork's appearance, but eager to set guidelines for the future — too eager perhaps. The interview excerpt, clearly a narrative construction, illustrates how easily a mutual agreement is established. Albeit in accordance with the artist, my account should make clear that this is only one thought and context-determined. Indeed, right after I thought to have found a consistency for *All shadows...* Dibbets deviated from his standpoint, the moment he saw long narrow shadows cast by the antique display cases in the adjacent gallery (fig. 7). He hastily added that *those* kinds of shadows could be included as well. Aware of this contradiction, Dibbets finally concluded, "It is a bit to your own liking."²⁵

The example makes clear that the artist's interview statements are not to be taken as unconditional truth, but demand careful interpretation. Moreover, the conversational

rapprochement is aimed at understanding and communicating the artwork as it is established in dialogue with the artist *and* the artwork, mediating its form. Our mutual input shows that neither the role of the artist, nor that of the conservator is fixed. The interactions between the material, the site, the artist, and the conservator make that the artwork's materialization takes form as a result of negotiations. Therefore guidelines would be only relatively useful, given that the artist adjusts them in response to immediate circumstances, depending on site-contextual input. This demonstrates the added value of combining an interview with participatory practice, which provides an extra dimension to both engaged listening and participant observation.²⁶ The art-making process itself is invaluable to witness and experience. Some information would never have come to light without the situation at hand, illuminating aspects that would otherwise be left unnoticed, let alone discussed.

Interpretation and Evaluation

While discussing the work with Dibbets during its installation, I noted that he was not keen on providing answers that would direct the terms and conditions for *All shadows...* too much, almost challenging the conservator to set guidelines. This suggests that *All shadows...* is more about liberty and adaptation to circumstances than could be captured in specifications.²⁷ The experience of co-producing the work enabled me to read between the lines, because what the artist said was not always in keeping with what was observed. For example, whereas Dibbets was hesitant about using the word "perfect" for *All shadows...*, conscious of the work's informal character, in practice he carefully cut the tape endings into sharp tips to

²³ Dibbets, audio recorded interview by author, April 10, 2009.

²⁴ Dibbets, personal communication, November 22, 2011.

²⁵ Dibbets, see note 23.

²⁶ On engaged listening in interview practices and participant observation in ethnography, see Forsey 2010.

²⁷ This is confirmed by Dibbets after reading the preliminary draft of my findings in this article. Personal communication by telephone, March 2, 2012.



complete geometrical forms (fig. 8). Yet, both Dibbets and his wife stated several times that he is not very precise in the execution of his work. This alleged nonchalance expressed in words could easily be misinterpreted for indifference, especially if Dibbets' careful way of working had remained unnoticed. This furthermore makes clear that annotations are indispensable to interpret interview transcriptions, which otherwise lack these observations.

Also contradictions became apparent. For example, it first seemed as if the work allows some wear.

JD: "If you tape on the floor, you will damage it by walking and that is actually part of it. So you don't need to be too precise. You can either repair it, or let go, and then you just take it away."²⁸

Later Dibbets stated that the work should not look too sloppy in a museum context.

JD: "It is a construction that consolidates light. You would want to have it, well, 'perfect' I would rather not say, but that may be just the word: as perfect as possible."²⁹

Then, to what extent is wear and tear tolerated? Only after posing closed questions were some boundaries established.³⁰ The work could bear stains caused by visitors walking over it, but when the lines become disrupted the work is considered damaged. This makes sense. After all, when the overall structure is altered, the relation to the architectural setting is lost.



FIG. 7 Antique display cases, by H.P. Berlage casting distinctive shadows on to the floor in the Kröller-Müller Museum, which appealed to Jan Dibbets.

FIG. 8 Jan Dibbets at work, carefully cutting the tape endings in sharp tips to complete the geometrical forms in *All shadows...*

²⁸ Dibbets, see note 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ This runs counter to the advised artist interview technique, because closed questions are steering, whereas open questions allow the artist to elaborate on self chosen aspects in their own words. Beerkens et al. 2012: 50.

Meanwhile it had become clear that our role, that of me and my colleague, had shifted from that of restrained conservators to co-producers of the artwork, exemplified most by our initiative to mark the sunny spots on the windowsills. Whereas the artist agreed to their inclusion, I am convinced that if we had not pointed out the sun on this spot, the area would not have been marked with tape (fig. 9). Without being too conscious of this action then — we just worked along as in a practical experiment to get to grips with the variability, eager to establish boundaries for *All shadows...* — it seemed like a test to see if we understood the artwork correctly and were able to make choices on our own. How far could we go? The artist was there to guide us.

A renewed look at old photographs was useful in this respect, because it turned out that the windowsills had been included previously in the early executions in Krefeld and Paris. Our contribution could thus be justified by what was later recognized on the photographs. Nevertheless, we had been taking liberties and shaped the artwork partly on our own initiative. A colleague who read my preliminary report proclaimed jokingly, “Now you went a step too far.”³¹ Although I thought I had made ourselves accountable by carefully describing our actions, fuelled by my ambiguous attitude towards the idea of co-producing an artwork because of the strict line that is drawn between conservation and creation — a line that should not be crossed — apparently I had not reflected critically enough upon my own involvement, which was still in the cooperative mode. The alleged neutral role of the conservator and the quest for minimal intervention were at stake. Peer discussion therefore proved helpful to the evaluation of

personal practices, resulting in a well-articulated and critical testimony.

Research and Practice

Working with the artist took place within a rather loose framework, yet decisive choices were made, taking the artwork from an open-ended concept to an explicit expression. This is even true for the completion of the title, which finally became *All shadows that occurred to me in the Kröller-Müller Museum on Good Friday 2009*. In fact, the idea of the work has nothing to do with this religious holiday, nor is its realization restricted to this one day. It just happened to be that day. Dibbets' suggestion to include this in the title for this occasion underscores the artwork's informal character and relatively arbitrary articulation. At the same time it does define time as a key component of the work.

As has already become clear from the previous example, working with the physical artwork improved the reading of photographic documentation. By adopting Dibbets' art-making process and working with the materials my eyes became better, observing more details, enabled by a combining of explicit and tacit knowledge. For instance, by taking a renewed look at the documentation, I suddenly noted small white marks on some of the taped lines in the earliest manifestations of *All shadows...* (fig. 1). When pointing them out to Dibbets, he explained that these are white stickers on which he had indicated the time.³² Further study of the photographic documentation made clear that this feature had already disappeared after 1970.

The information about the time labels was new to us, and Dibbets had forgotten about it.³³ This not only illustrates

³¹ During a discussion for which I would like to thank IJsbrand Hummelen, as part of the New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art research group, December 16, 2011. See Vall et al. 2011.

³² For this purpose he had used Letraset transfers. Dibbets, see note 14.

³³ Ibid.



FIG. 9 Conservator Evelyne Snijders during installation process of *All shadows...* marking the sunny spots on the windowsills with masking tape.

Conclusion

Since the form of Jan Dibbets' work *All shadows that occurred to me in...* is open-ended, unforeseen fixation by dogmatic guidelines was avoided and a conservator's testimony was compiled instead. The autoethnographic account includes a thorough reflection on participatory observations and narrative constructions, helped by peer judgement, to pinpoint the conservator's role in relation to the artwork's articulation and continuation. This approach reveals that practicalities and site-contextual aspects provoke questions that would never emerge from the literature and archival documents alone. Moreover, working with the artwork's physical material greatly improves how one reads the archival documents, leading to a deeper understanding of the work's form and content and a more accurate biographical account. It has also become clear that the work's appearance is determined in dialogue and within a given set of circumstances. An autoethnographic approach and a personal testimony provide a transparent view on these processes. It could even be suggested that this form of documentation adheres to the idea of reversibility. Moreover, apart from being informative and transparent by drawing up a personal testimony, it makes clear that the information will be interpreted in turn. If potential guidelines will be deduced from a conservator's testimony, this is done in awareness of the new personal input interpreting the material. This demonstrates the value of following autoethnographic methodology in conservation documentation. It raises awareness and forces critical thinking. Ideally the artwork's iterations will be followed continuously in a similarly critical manner, enriching the work with new testimonies as input for decision-making prior to future installation moments, keeping a close eye on the artwork's continuation in time.

that the practice of working with the physical artwork serves in-depth research, illuminating archival documents from a new angle, but it also demonstrates the general importance of studying the materialisation of conceptual art. The rediscovery of the long gone labels, barely noticeable on the old photographs, enriches the early stages of the artwork's life. They must have formed an important contribution to the experience of the work. Dibbets confirmed this when I asked him about their function: "It is interesting for the visitor to see how the moment that he perceives the work relates to the moment when the work was executed."³⁴ The labels thus lent the work a more narrative character, adding chronology, making time and precision more explicit, as has also become clear from the way Dibbets pinpointed the work's temporal title. Now the question arose whether the labels should — or could — be incorporated in *All shadows...* again. Dibbets answered that he would not prevent anyone from doing so, but claimed at the same time that there is no need for it.³⁵ This apparent indifference could be seen as a way to justify their absence for such a long time. In the end, however, the owner of the artwork is left free to decide.

³⁴ Dibbets, e-mail to author, November 1, 2011.

³⁵ Dibbets, see note 14.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kaayk and Jan Dibbets for their generous cooperation and feedback, as well as former Kröller-Müller Museum director Evert van Straaten, and the entire museum staff. Furthermore I thank Evelyne Snijders, Marleen Wagenaar and René Peschar from the University of Amsterdam and a special thanks to my research colleagues from the New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art research group, as well as to my advisors Deborah Cherry (University of the Arts London) and Glenn Wharton (New York University), Julia Noordegraaf and Ella Hendriks (both University of Amsterdam) for all supportive feedback.

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