

Video calling Mark Manders: from artist interview to co-constructed audiovisual art technological source

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ABSTRACT This paper demonstrates how careful use of interviews for conservation research and technical art history can help bridge the gap between conservation concerns and curatorial practices by the example of interviewing Dutch artist Mark Manders, with special reference to his object-based installation *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002) from the collection of Moderna Museet, Sweden. This study not only addresses the interview content but also analyses the influence of technological aids, methodology and the social setting, including the museum context and the educational purpose of the interview, conducted with students from Malmö Art Academy/ Lund University. The project resulted in a strengthening of institutional collaboration through a follow-up interview with Swedish curator Andreas Nilsson, and a redressing of the power relations between interviewer and interviewee when Mark Manders started filming around his studio with his mobile phone to better explain his work. The use of video calling allowed the interviewee to steer the narrative and transform the interview into a ‘virtual walking interview’, resulting in a co-constructed, audiovisual art technological source on Mark Manders’ studio practice. New developments in transcribing spoken narratives and FAIR archiving of standards are highlighted to support inter-institutional collaboration, including as part of the Dutch research project Oral History – Stories at the Museum around Artworks (OH-SMArt). Moreover, the project illustrates how collaboration between museums and universities can support good practice in conducting interviews, not only by sharing time and expertise together but also by eliciting engagement through student involvement.

KEYWORDS artist interview, artmaking process, contemporary art, Mark Manders, oral history

Introduction

This paper demonstrates how careful use of interviews for conservation research and technical art history can help to bridge the gap between conservation concerns and curatorial practices by the example of an interview with Dutch artist Mark Manders (b. 1968), on 12 January 2023, with special reference to his object-based installation *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002) from the collection of Moderna Museet, Sweden. This study not only discusses the interview content but also analyses the influence of the social setting and the used technical methodology that has resulted in a co-constructed, audiovisual art technological source.

The use of interviews in conservation research and technical art history has increasingly become standard practice for museum professionals, as evidenced by the various guidelines and programmes that have been developed to support the conservation of modern and contemporary art (e.g. INCCA 2002; Beerkens *et al.* 2012; Ryan and O’Banion 2016; Rivenc *et al.* 2017; Debik and Giering 2021;

Schaik 2023).¹ Conducting interviews is an invaluable means of documenting aspects of complex artworks that are not easily grasped in images and writing. Moreover, oral communication with the artist can be helpful to gauge preferred appearance or possible development of an artwork, and to understand the relation between the content and material technological specificities of the work, which is vital to inform appropriate forms of care. Meanwhile, academic studies in conservation have shown how interviewing is not merely retrieving information but a critical practice that can add to the artwork’s identity and steer its development (e.g. Saaze 2009; Stigter 2012; Wharton 2016; Gordon 2021; Wielocha 2021). Indeed, as part of constructing artwork documentation, interviewing can be of direct influence on the artwork’s future, depending on how the information is interpreted and used in decision-making for conservation and presentation. Many museums, on the other hand, are still grappling with finding the time and resources to critically reflect on their own roles as part of this research practice and are lacking the tools to do

so. Archiving interview material requires time and attention to compile a transcript, acquire metadata and obtain consent following ethical research procedures and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Apart from gaining insight into how to interpret spoken narratives critically, many museum professionals cannot always conduct interviews at pivotal moments in an artwork's life, such as acquisition and new installation moments because of time constraints. Nor do they have sufficient time and tools to archive the resulting material in a sustainable way, hindered by the lack of access to a long-term archiving system to facilitate the laborious workflow of transcribing and disclosing the material according to oral history standards.

Recording and archiving interviews for future consultation is in fact what largely defines oral history, following historian Donald A. Ritchie:

An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives (Ritchie 2015: 1).

Keeping such research material safe and accessible is highly recommended by UNESCO in support of Open Science (Bronner *et al.* 2022). Sharing information is especially desirable if public money is involved, as is the case with most universities and many museums. The aim to make all generated research material Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable (FAIR) has become an important principle in academic research (Wilkinson *et al.* 2016).

This contribution suggests that collaboration between museums and universities can support good practice in oral history research – not only by sharing time and expertise together, but also by eliciting engagement through student involvement, and strengthening of institutional collaboration where this is not always a given, considering the division of tasks and lack of time. In addition, it highlights developments that importantly have improved transcribing and archiving oral history data to help make these unique interviews fit for (digital) research in the future.

Oral history workflow tools

To overcome the hurdles associated with archiving spoken narratives and improve the laborious workflow for oral history as well as advance critical use of this source material, the University of Amsterdam has initiated various research projects, including Oral History – Stories at the Museum around Artworks (OH-SMArt) (2021–2025) in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NISV), DANS and the University of Twente.² Some of the deliverables of this project have been used to process the recordings and disclose the discussed interview with Mark Manders.

An important development since the beginning of OH-SMArt is the significant improvement of automatic speech recognition through a fundamental change in technology, now based on artificial intelligence. The open source programme Whisper, from Open AI (Radford *et al.* 2022),³ has been adopted by the Dutch digital research infrastructure, including for OH-SMArt, and was used to process the recordings of this interview. To correct small mistakes in results of the automatic speech recognition, Whisper Corrector has been used, a free open source and downloadable program that makes processing possible completely independent from commercial web-based applications.⁴

These new developments allow for a relatively easy transcription process, making it attractive to do by researchers themselves, as was done for this interview. Moreover, revisiting the interview through careful listening of the recording provides good insight into the dynamics of the interview process, including one's own role as interviewer. A more nuanced understanding of how the dialogue has unfolded allows for a critical view of how issues are addressed and discussed, and especially why, which provides a better basis for interpretation.

Another new tool is the OH-SMArt Deposit Application (DANS 2024) with a user-friendly interface to archive the recordings, alongside metadata, a summary, related links and keywords connected to the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) and Union List of Artist Names (ULAN). This application channels the data to an open-source research repository at DANS and is available for all researchers and museum professionals in the Netherlands or concerned with Dutch art and cultural heritage.



Figure 1 Mark Manders, *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002), collection Moderna Museet, donated by Gerard and Eva De Geer. Courtesy Mark Manders, Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp & Tanya Bonakdar Gallery New York/ Los Angeles. (Photo: Prallan Allsten/Moderna Museet.)

Setting

The immediate reason for the interview with the Dutch artist Mark Manders (1968) was a three-day Artist Interview Workshop as part of a Research Ethics Seminar for the two-year MA Fine Arts in Artistic Research (MFAAR) at Malmö Art Academy/ Lund University, a postgraduate programme that prepares artists for a doctorate in the visual arts.⁵ The Moderna Museet agreed to become involved and proposed interviewing Mark Manders about his work *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002), which was on display in Moderna Museet Malmö as part of the exhibition *Conditioned Movement: Works from the Moderna Museet Collection* (26 February 2022–29 January 2023).⁶ There were no installation guidelines when this object-based installation was donated to Moderna Museet by collectors Gerard and Eva De Geer in 2013. As there had not been any contact with the artist at that time, it was a longstanding wish of the conservators to conduct an artist interview because of the vulnerable items in the installation and the configuration of the elements in the exhibition space.



Figure 2 Mark Manders, detail of *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002) showing his clothes, shoes, toothbrush, toothpaste and contact lenses. (Photo: Mathias Johansson.)



Figure 3 Interview setup with My Bundgaard filming Mark Manders' *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* during the exhibition *Conditioned Movement*, Moderna Museet Malmö, 12 January 2023. (Photo: Sanneke Stigter.)

Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence is an object-based installation that consists of three separate furniture elements – a bed, a daybed and a chair – made out of square steel tubes and sheet steel, the beds covered with a muddy grey substance as bedding made out of polyester. An abstract figure without arms is lying on the daybed and has the same muddy grey appearance as the bedding, giving the setting a rather alienating atmosphere (Fig. 1). This feeling is enhanced by some strange elements: a ballpoint pen suspended from an iron rod above the figure on the daybed, pointing downward to a hole where the figure's mouth would be, creating unresolved tension; five unused tea bags standing upright in a carefully arranged composition on the floor; and a bundle of neatly arranged clothes to be worn by a single person wedged between the bed end and the chair, secured by the pressure of a pair of shoes. On top of the clothes are placed a packed toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste and a pair of contact lenses (Fig. 2).

Over the years, a number of questions have arisen. There are concerns about the exposure of small elements with the risk of displacement, and the installation history of the work suggests some liberty in the way the objects are placed. However,

what is allowed or desired and what not? The word 'room' in the title suggests that a confined space is required: is that indeed the case? What is an ideal architectural setting? Also, the row of teabags, absent in the first iterations of the installation, has been presented by itself with a distinct title, suggesting it is an independent work – not an unimportant one given its prominent place in *Mark Manders: Reference Book* (Manders 2012: 8). Can it still function independently?

The interview (12 January 2023) was planned to take place in the vicinity of the installation on display. It was set up as a videocall using Zoom to connect Sweden with Belgium. The interview was recorded on a MacBook Pro using earbuds with microphones for optimal speech recording and to prevent acoustic feedback using multiple audio devices (Fig. 3). The questions prepared by the four MFAAR students⁷ for a semi-structured interview were placed in a logical order based on the SBMK Interview Scenario (SBMK 1999). This structures the interview from general to specific questions to establish a firm base about the creative process and the sociocultural context, to serve as a backbone for the details that follow. This should create a rich source that has broader

relevance and applicability than if solely discussing a single case study. Furthermore, establishing general values at the beginning of the interview creates a reference for validation of what is being discussed later in the interview.

Interview Part I: Self-portrait as a building

When Mark Manders is asked to describe the work *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* on display, he replies by explaining how he developed his art practice to provide context to the work. He stipulates the importance of understanding the work as part of a larger whole.

In my work, I started as a writer. And when I was 18 years old, I kind of stopped writing and I started writing with objects. My plan was to write about an imaginary building as a kind of self-portrait. I decided to write about the building for the rest of my life; a fictional building with objects. So, I started making floor plans and later rooms (Stigter and Bundgaard 2024a).⁸

Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence is one of these rooms. During the interview, Manders provides numerous details about the artmaking process and the materials he used. He kept notes that he had consulted for the interview. Most spectacular is his story about how he had left his clothes by way of concluding the artmaking process of this work. This information was also published when the work was first shown (Manders 2002: 29). This suggests that it is an important contribution to the idea of the work.

After I was finished with this room, I took off all my clothes and my lenses, and I put them in between the chairs [furniture]. So, it feels like somebody who lived in this room just disappeared. It's really about not being there. It's about absence.

By making the act of undressing and leaving the room a part of the artmaking process, it becomes clear that it is not just 'somebody' who disappeared, but the artist. Manders left the clothes that he was wearing almost by way of signing the piece. After further questioning, Manders confides, 'To be honest, I think I washed them.' This suggests that inclusion of

the bundle of clothes was well prepared or at least consciously presented as a performative aspect as part of the work, deliberately communicated by the artist. By doing so, he indeed provides the 'persistent absence' from the title, as part of the room that he had just created.

Prior to the interview, the conservators at Moderna Museet understood the undressing before leaving the room to conclude the artmaking process as a performative aspect that is integral to the work. From this impression follows that his personal items hold significance as tangible remnants that capture the essence and memory of this specific event, so that it would be problematic to replace these exact same items for exhibition copies out of precaution or if required in the future. However, with the following information from the interview, a more conceptual understanding of the installation can be weighed against the narrated performative aspect when attributing value to the personal items in the work.

The importance of 1986

Manders continues to explain that time, or rather timelessness, is important in his work. His rooms should look timeless, or at least of no later than 1986, regardless of when the installations are actually made. They are all part of the self-portrait that he conceived as an ongoing project stretching over time:

I want to put all my work in one moment. All the rooms that I make are just left behind. And I started in 1986, so they should be made in 1986. They're related to that same time area. So, I cannot use a tea label from 2000 or 2008. So, I kind of remade a tea label.

Manders refers to the inclusion of the teabags in *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence*. He remade the design of the tea label matching older ones to replace the labels of modern-day teabags: 'I printed the labels because the labels that you could buy around the 2000s ... I was not allowed to use them.' This strictness in directing his artmaking returns several times during the interview, as does the work's precise visual appearance, in this case suggesting a different time period, in other cases a different material as will become clear in Part II of the interview.

The row of five teabags already existed as a separate artwork with a rather abstract title consisting of five en dashes in a mathematical notation, — (— / — / — / — / —) (1998). Manders added this work to *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* when it was exhibited at Jarla Partilager in Stockholm, the exhibition space managed by collectors De Geer (13 September 2010–18 February 2011). He explains that he has continued using teabags in other works:

I made more groups of teabags. ... They form kind of sentences. These pieces are called *Finished Sentence*. Just to let you know that these five teabags later evolved into other pieces.

Only with this installation, now in the Moderna Museet collection, can the row of five teabags still function as a separate work with its own title. As it turns out, Moderna Museet has not one work by Mark Manders in their collection, but two: a welcome result of the interview for a curatorial follow-up.

Time capsule

Manders' wish to generate a sort of timelessness for his work linked to the moment when he conceived his self-portrait, forms the basis for his thoughts about aging and damage. The use of exhibition copies would be an important precautionary measure to prevent complete loss of the small and vulnerable items, given the value that can be attributed to the original objects because of their story. The loose items on top of the clothes are especially susceptible to decay and loss, in particular the contact lenses lying unprotected during an exhibition period. The installation came with only this single pair of hard contact lenses, still intact and kept in the contact lens holder in which they had been stored. Based on Manders' information, he had been wearing these contact lenses during the art-making process, until he took them out and made them part of the artwork.

In order to make well-informed decisions about possible replacement of parts, it is crucial to know the significance of these items to the artwork as a whole, so that it will not harm the work's meaning. Using exhibition copies would perhaps save some of the authentic features for the purpose of research and later reference. When addressing the possibility of replacing vulnerable items during exhibition,

Manders agrees and makes clear that he is in favour of keeping the objects reminiscent of the time when they were made.

If something is wrong, and you know that something is wrong, and you know how it should be and if it's possible to replace it, I have no problems to ... Yeah, I think it's fantastic if you can replace it then.

He knows that conservators are not keen to replace original parts in artworks, as one of his assistants is a trained art conservator. That may be why he formulates the idea of replacement cautiously at first, and then almost with enthusiasm, calling it 'fantastic'.

Manders is clearly in favour of replacing or remaking elements if their condition no longer conveys the desired timeless appearance. This principle applies equally to Manders' shoes, considering the condition of the rubber soles. They are under constant tension when pressed together between the pieces of furniture to hold the bundle of clothes in position. The rubber has already started to decay judging from the loss of flexibility. Ultimately, they will become unable to fulfil their task of holding up the clothes. When asked for his view on the matter, Manders made clear that he has no problem with either replacing or remaking them providing they look similar.

I understand that's a really difficult topic for you all [conservators]. Because some artists really think that the decay is part of the work, or it shouldn't be remade because when it's lost, it's lost. I really prefer that it gets replaced.

If replacing original parts is allowed, the question arises of how to value the specificity of the unique personal items to the artwork. A better understanding of the fact that the various items in the work should be representing the artist in 1986, rather than that they carry importance because they were his and worn by him, opens up the possibility of using exhibition copies when the work is on display. Manders indicates that this is possible for the clothes as well. The fact that he admits that he had actually washed the clothes before making them part of the work makes clear that this feature is more about suggesting the idea of having left the room than that this performative act is part of the work.

Carpet flooring

Manders' overall idea of his work as his self-portrait as a building is best expressed in his solo exhibitions that include carpet flooring to connect the rooms, like chapters in a book, considering the artist started out as a writer. However, in a collection presentation, such a connecting element is lacking. In Malmö, this was partly solved by positioning the work at the far end of the last gallery space. The fact that *Conditioned Movement* was a group exhibition formed a good starting point to discuss the work's installation parameters.

In answer to the question of whether his work can be shown in the vicinity of different work by other artists, Manders does not directly reject it. Instead, he tactfully explains how the work was first conceived, and how he installed it previously.

When I made it, I really made it as one room. I showed it one time in a museum in Toronto, and the room was too big. And then, I made a kind of line, so that you couldn't enter from the other part. And there was a carpet. The room felt almost scary – but also very precise.

When enquiring about his first impression of how it is installed in Malmö, Manders indicates that it lacks the sense of a room, and misses some kind of subdued sense of suspense.

Here, how it's shown, it is more like three objects of which you can see that they belong to each other. But for me, it's not really a room. I would do it totally different. ... I would really create more tension in it. That's something that I also really enjoy when I make exhibitions; to create these very silent rooms; that if you step into it, that it feels like that you're in a place that you don't belong. There's a strange kind of tension.

At the same time, Manders is respectful of the choices made, well aware of the forces that come into play after a work has left the studio.

I make these works and I have certain ideas how I want to present them. But at the same time, they're also part of the world now. And I can say things about them, but they're also part of the world. And the world, in this case a museum, can also show them in the way that they think is best at this moment.

When preparing exhibitions himself, he prefers to install his 'rooms' with a specifically chosen wall-to-wall carpet in a muted colour of which he keeps reference samples in his archive. He makes an effort to match the colour as closely as possible, but the final result depends on what is locally available.

Curator interview

As carpeted gallery rooms contribute to the overall atmosphere of Mark Manders' work, it was felt necessary to engage the museum curator of the exhibition, Andreas Nilsson, in the discussion. He emphasises the intended uncanny feeling in the exhibition text, 'There is a melancholy and slightly creepy aura about Mark Manders' installation *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence*' (Nilsson 2022: 24). In a curator interview organised to complement the artist interview on 17 October 2023, Nilsson explains that he had included Manders' work in *Conditioned Movement* because of the suggested stillness: 'We were looking for this piece that somehow addressed movement in a very subtle way. I think he says it himself in your interview; it is as if time is frozen in his work' (Bundgaard 2023).

This arrested development is indeed important and also becomes clear in the artist interview, when Manders replies to the question as to what he thinks of the single-channel video work that is exhibited in the same room as his object-based installation: 'Normally, in my work, there's no movement. Like, everything is frozen. So, for me it's a bit strange that there is movement in the room.' Such details about the way *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* is presented are of critical importance when discussing the desired appearance in relation to conservation. This is why both conservation issues and installation matters are addressed during the artist interview; they are closely interwoven. After all, a correct presentation of the installation is part of the work's conservation.

When the curator hears the results of the artist interview, he specifies in reaction, 'I really like the idea of a carpet.' Moreover, sensing the overlap of conservation and presentation, Nilsson suggests collaborating in defining the guidelines for the work. 'I think that maybe we can help each other in making an installation manual.' This demonstrates how the practice of interviewing various stakeholders involved in an artwork not only sheds light on conservation concerns and curatorial practices, but can also strengthen

collaboration in a mutual understanding of the required care for artworks in the collection.

On an even larger scale, to maintain Manders' concept of his self-portrait as a building, it is important to realise that this interview has cross-institutional significance. Manders' work is collected all over the world and represented by galleries on three different continents: Europe, the United States and Asia. Ideally, worldwide collaboration is required between collectors and institutions to guarantee an overall approach in the preservation and presentation of his work so that it can remain a potential whole as a self-portrait.⁹ Therefore, it is important for museums to engage with the national digital research infrastructure to ensure interoperability of their research material. Interoperability is the most critical aspect from the FAIR principles (Jacobsen et al. 2020). This can only be achieved by careful collaboration to secure the possibility of connecting archival data, both on a national and international level, in support of knowledge exchange between museums to manage an artist's oeuvre with shared responsibility.

Critical interpretation

How could the results of this case study interview be used? It seems that the importance of the year 1986 can be used as a possible touchstone for decision-making in conservation, frozen in time, over valuing Manders' personal items because he has worn them. Whereas this is a suggestion based on interpretation of the information gathered at this point, it deviates from what is generally believed to be a prerequisite in museums to permanently include the original materials that the artist has touched, used or worn and then selected to include in a work of art.

Such a line of reasoning based on the interview could be made explicit and archived as professional user interpretation to enrich the interview data to better understand the possible consequences for the work of art when using the source. The aim of OH-SMArt is to add such user input to the source to help advance critical use of interview materials in order to elicit a reflexive stance with the next professional involved. This would not only enrich the interview but also contextualise it with several viewpoints that, moreover, serve to enhance critical reflection with the researcher, which is vital when interpreting the interview content for the purpose of conservation of an artwork.

The idea of adding user feedback is based on the DIAL for Complex Artworks (Stigter 2017, 2019; Tartaglia 2024). A comparable tool to raise awareness with the researcher is being developed as part of a digital research environment where the interview material can be consulted alongside other audiovisual material.¹⁰ This should make the act of interpretation explicit, one's own role as part of it. New research testimonies will be archived as related documents that can be consulted with the source. Such a reflexivity tool serves two ends: it enriches the source with a layered information system and elicits a reflexive approach with the researcher, both by a question prompted, e.g., what is the purpose of the query, and by being confronted with viewpoints of other users, making one aware of one's bias when interpreting the material. A dynamic archiving system that gives voice to researchers accessing the material activates critical thinking and allows for a more diverse understanding of the source material, ultimately resulting in better qualitative research.

Interview Part II: Studio practice

Mark Manders is keen to convey his way of working in relation to maintaining his work, judging from his extraordinary hospitality to offer a filmed tour around his studio, situated in Ronse, Belgium, stipulating how this adds to the understanding of his art. Indeed, this second part of the interview underlines the precise character of Manders' work, his careful choice of materials and exact way of presentation. His willingness to get this across is telling: 'I care that it survives'.

This virtual studio tour is also recorded and reveals that Manders' visual language is based on a set of rules about the use of words, numbers and colours. His artmaking practice seems to be situated between structure and layout, shaping up in floor plans and furniture design, and his fascination for single elements functioning in groups. Language is such a system, using groups of words. His self-imposed rule that every word cannot be used more than once per artwork forms the basis for a stock of newspapers that Manders has printed using all the words that exist in the world, but only used once. The sentences appear normal but cannot be read or related to time and place. They form the perfect material for making papermâché, as it is timeless and universal, something he anticipated.



Figure 4 Part of Mark Manders' studio with *Composition with Four Yellow Verticals* (2017–2019). Painted bronze, wood, iron (edition of 3 + 1 AP), 266 × 391 × 419 cm. Courtesy Mark Manders, Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp & Tanya Bonakdar Gallery New York/ Los Angeles. (Photo: Piet-Albert Goethals.)

I couldn't use [normal] newspapers because they are related to time. And to a place also. So, I started making my own newspapers, and I used every word in English only once. And so these newspapers are made. These are all the words that we have, all the English words. So, if I make an exhibition, I take for example the words, 'table'; 'chair'; 'yellow'; 'newspaper'. So like a writer, I choose words from these newspapers (Stigter and Bundgaard 2024b).

Manders continues to explain nearly every artwork in his studio with particular detail to his use of materials. He zooms in on *Composition with Four Yellow Verticals*, a more than lifesize sculpture of four giant busts with human faces, eyes closed. They have a monochrome light grey tone, with one contrasting yellow vertical bar pushed into each of the faces just below the left eyebrow, as if a book is placed into the head instead of on a shelf. While these yellow segments are as smooth as the spine of a book, the rest of the sculpture's surface texture shows an overall pattern of drying cracks suggesting dried clay (Fig. 4).

However, Manders reveals the true nature of the material of *Composition with Four Yellow Verticals* by knocking on the sculpture to produce a clear and hollow sound. 'This is ... painted bronze ... painted with acrylic. First it has a protection layer, and then it's painted with acrylic. But it feels exactly like dry clay.' This imaginative play with materiality is

telling for Manders' sensitivity to the visual appearance of his work. The impression of clay, including the lumps at the back of the neck near the edges of the bust, suggest the act of sculpting, or rather, an arrested act of sculpting, leaving the material to dry and form cracks as a result. Still standing on what seem to be adjustable pallets, the sculpture suggests a situation where the artist has left the work, recalling the atmosphere of *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence*.

Another work that Manders describes is one based on his fascination for 'things that want to be together, in a group', pointing to *Still-life with Broken Moment* (1998–2004). He explains that he is fascinated by seeing 'a group of sugar' expressed in a sugar cube or in a heap of sugar. It is a revealing example of how Manders speaks about his work. One part of the 'group of sugar' is sitting on the vinyl record, the other part directly next to it; it is broken. Whereas neither group can produce a sound, Manders considers the group that has landed on the vinyl more poetic than the group spilled next to it, detailing how the particles are similar in size and appearance as the diamond head of the needle in the arm of a record player. Although the arm is absent, it is the suggestion of sound that supports this thought. Installing this piece includes an act of pouring sugar over the edge of the record every time it is being put on display; a gesture of 'writing' that activates the poetry of the work.

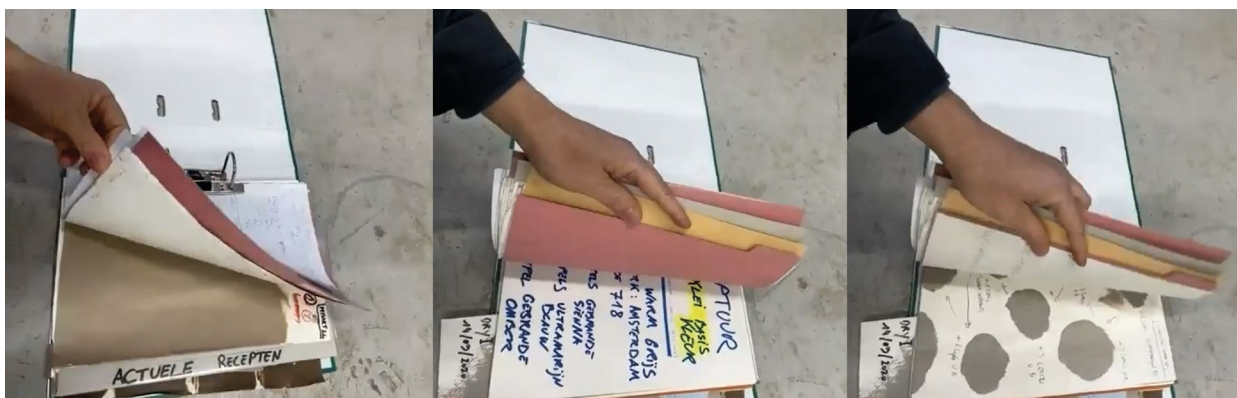


Figure 5 Mark Manders shows one of his studio recipe books, here with recipes for the clay colour for his painted sculptures. (Interview stills: My Bundgaard.)

Reversal of power

To conservators this studio tour was an unbelievable treat, seeing and hearing all the ‘ins and outs’ of Manders’ work right in the heart of where it is made. However, sensing that the students’ attention seemed to have waned at this point, and that we had already taken up so much of Manders’ time, there was an attempt to bring the interview to a conclusion: ‘Well, I think we have a really fantastic impression of how you work. Thank you so much for sharing.’ Manders, however, responds hastily: ‘Yeah, but now I come to the department ... Wait. I will show you a little bit more and then you will also understand the technique.’ He hurries through the factory-like hall, pointing to several works in passing. Finally, he arrives at a large painting studio. ‘So this is the place where I paint my things,’ filming a wall-covered cabinet filled with pots of paint, brushes and varnish. He demonstrates his painting technique for the clay-like textures of his sculptures, achieved with several sprayed layers of acrylic emulsion paint, of which the last two are dry brushed when still wet to finalise the matte texture that is mimicking dry clay. To substantiate the care that goes into this artmaking process, he shows us a large notebook with studio recipes and paint samples that he is willing to share (Fig. 5).

This demonstrates how Manders – the interviewee – starts guiding the interview and is directing the filming with his mobile phone. Although the interviewers have clearly designed the interview from a conservation point of view, the interviewee is now in charge of pointing out projects that he deems of interest in this respect. It fills in what we may never have thought of asking. This shows the benefit of an online interview and using mobile devices. Being able to walk around resembles the method

of a ‘walking interview’, a form that is often used in social anthropology and urban studies, exactly because of what the sense of place has to offer; to provide ‘richer insights into embodied and sensory experiences’ and ‘reversal of power between interviewer and interviewee’ (Bilsand and Siebert 2023: 1). Being at ease in his own space and habitat allows the interviewee to think more freely. Control over the recording tools is another asset that can redress the power relations between interviewer and interviewee, i.e. the museum and the artist. The result of this ‘virtual walking interview’ is a co-constructed, audiovisual source with genuine enthusiasm from both sides, demonstrating that Manders clearly cares about the conservation of his work and to get this across with conservators and students representing the next generation of professionals.

Skiapodes

To conclude the interview, Mark Manders shows his latest work, a set of creations based on one word, namely ‘Skiapode’. It refers to a mythical figure with one giant foot, typically holding it upright to protect its face from the sun when laying down. Manders has created an entire artistic canon around this little known mythical figure, including depictions of Skiapodes by other artists, which he is distributing using several media: installed as a slideshow, and on what appears to be a Wikipedia page, headed *WipipekiA* in the exact same font,¹¹ as well as in two books, one notably in Italian, *La Scomparsa degli Sciapodi*, meaning *The Disappearance of the Skiapodes* (Manders 2022).¹² Similar to knocking on his clay-like sculptures to reveal that they are bronze, Manders demonstrates the book’s hidden trick. He taps the cover with one hand and shows

how the images on the pages have turned into black and white; tapping the cover again, but now cross-wise with two hands, the images have disappeared altogether. Pointing at the back of the book, 'But with this QR-code, you can get it back.'

The technique used for this book will possibly become common knowledge in a few years' time but at this moment the work succeeds marvellously in bewildering the audience. This becomes all the more apparent during an artist talk led by curator and Orange County Museum of Art director Heidi Zuckerman in celebration of the exhibition *Writing Skiapod* at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (11 February–8 April 2023). Although Manders clearly indicates that part of his project is fake, the paintings represented in the slideshow, supposedly by, among others, Philip Guston, Maria Lassnig and Kazimir Malevich – with instantly recognisable painting styles – prompted Zuckerman to say, 'I've seen a bunch of these paintings before, but I never knew what they were representations of, was a Skiapod' (Zuckerman and Manders 2023). Manders' overall concept, visual language and choice of media is apparently so sophisticated that it takes time to sink in.

While Manders' installation, *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence*, has been living its life for over 20 years by the time of this interview, Manders' myth of the Skiapod is only just entering the world. What he says about it now may be crucial for future care, indicating the importance of interviews contemporary to the time when artworks are created, exhibited and acquired, making them highly resourceful for later moments in time.

Conclusion

The interview with artist Mark Manders about the art installation *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* has made clear that his working process adheres to a set of conceptual rules based on the idea of writing with objects, and that all of his works are part of a self-portrait as a building, conceived of in 1986. On a practical level, rather than adhering the highest value to the objects in the installation that have been the artist's personal items, it is the representation of the year 1986 – frozen in time – that could guide decisions for conservation treatment and presentation of the work. Importantly, the work's presentation in a carpeted gallery contributes to convey the intended alienating atmosphere and

thus helps to preserve the idea of the work, bridging conservation and curatorial practices. The result of the artist interview nourished renewed collaboration between museum departments through a follow-up interview with curator Andreas Nilsson, indicating that interviewing is not only a good research tool but also a means to connect museum departments and collaborate in the care of artworks.

On a methodological level, the technical methodology turned out to allow for a redressing of the power relations between interviewer and interviewee during the interview, which became apparent when Mark Manders started filming around his studio with his mobile phone to better explain his work. This way the interviewee could steer the narrative. The simple technical setup of video calling and using mobile devices provided a perfect platform to share authority over the interview content and allow for a 'virtual walking interview'. Both the interviewee and interviewer could remain situated in their own habitats, at the location of their choice, while co-creating the narrative. With a mobile phone, the artist could direct the filming, choose the subject and emphasise the themes and details that he considered most important with respect to the care of his work, turning the interview into a valuable co-constructed art technological source.

Finally, the project has illustrated how collaboration between museums and universities can support good practice in conducting interviews – not only by sharing time and expertise together, resulting in a strengthening of institutional collaboration, but also by eliciting engagement through student involvement. The educational setting might have contributed to the artist's willingness to share his ideas so thoughtfully with a younger generation, using the interview to bridge the gap between Manders' art today and the future, serving art history through the lens of conservation. This unique source is made accessible and interoperable for worldwide reuse to guarantee that the information can serve Mark Manders' lifelong 'Building as a Self-Portrait', distributed in collections all around the world, could still remain a potential whole.

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Notes

1. See also 'VoCA: Voices in Contemporary Art': <https://voca.network> (accessed 28 May 2024).
2. OH-SMART has been granted funding from the national Platform for Digital Infrastructure - Social Sciences and Humanities (DPI-SSH).
3. For OSX, MacWhisper is available free from <https://goodsnooze.gumroad.com/l/macwhisper>, or via payment from the App Store; for Windows either through Subtitle Edit, <https://github.com/SubtitleEdit/subtitleedit/releases>, or Python, both options explained in the UvA's *Interviews in Conservation Initiative* (I.C.I. Guidelines under Resources, www.uva.nl/ici (all accessed 28 May 2024).
4. Whisper Corrector generates a text file (txt), subtitles (srt) and an especially prepared 'word-txt' file (txt) that includes layout settings to produce a readable transcript; if copy-pasted in Word the left margin can be dragged 3.5 cm to the right for speaker separation. The tool is free and supported by CLARIN, the European research infrastructure for language as social and cultural data, <http://speechandtech.eu> (accessed 28 May 2024).
5. The workshop was organised by Sanneke Stigter and took place between 11 and 13 January 2023.
6. The exhibition was curated by Andreas Nilsson in cooperation with the artist duo Gideonsson/Londré.
7. In consultation with the authors of this paper.
8. Mark Manders is quoted from both interviews conducted on 12 January 2023 in chronological order; the case study first, the studio tour second, referred to as 'a' and 'b' in the references (Stigter and Bundgaard 2024a,b).
9. The idea of a potential whole refers to the concept of 'potential oneness' in Brandi 2005: 50.
10. A prototype of OH-SMART's Reflexivity Tool will be integrated in the CLARIAH Media Suite, a research environment for audiovisual data of the Dutch digital research infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences (CLARIAH): <https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/> (accessed 28 May 2024).
11. See <https://www.markmanders.com/wikipedia-skiapode> (accessed 28 May 2024).
12. Manders has appropriated and expanded the Skiapode myth in collaboration with artist Simon Bultynck, one of his co-workers.

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Front cover illustration: Asger Jorn in his studio at 143 Boulevard de la Gare, Paris. (Photo: Ib Hansen, courtesy Museum Jorn archive.)

Back cover illustrations: Left: Mark Manders, *Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence* (2001–2002): detail. (Photo: Mathias Johansson.)

Right: Bernt Notke's altarpiece in Tallin: three faces of the Virgin Mary from the 15th, 17th and 19th century (before, during and after conservation treatment). (Photos: Martin Siplane.)

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Bridging^{the} Gap

Synergies between Art History and Conservation

Edited by Birgitte Sauge, Thierry Ford, Tine Frøysaker
and Klaas Jan van den Berg



Collaborative research across diverse fields of expertise and institutional boundaries can lead to new insights and hence dust off long-held beliefs. Although challenging, pursuing this goal can yield surprising results when accomplished. This volume of peer-reviewed papers and poster texts is the result of the international conference *Bridging the Gap: Synergies between Art History and Conservation*, held at the National Museum of Norway. The papers, which explore artworks created over a span of more than 1,000 years, discuss topics ranging from abstract concepts to molecular details.

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