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Between concept and material. Working with conceptual art: a conservator's testimony

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Abstract

Conceptual art challenges the idea of traditional art conservation. Aimed at negating the unique material object in art, conceptual artworks confront the conservator with difficult dilemmas and challenging situations. How can one preserve a *concept* when there is *material* to work with? Should this be done through keeping the material, even when it no longer conveys the message? Or through working with artist interviews or artist participation, despite the challenge of potentially conflicting viewpoints? Or through documentation, and if so: how? This study explores the various approaches taken during the process of conservation of conceptual art in a museum context, by assessing conceptual art through the lens of conservation. This generates original research material, based on personal interviews, practice-led research, and participatory observation, revealing behind-the-scenes museum practice, and casting new light on iconic artworks.

Three claims are made that differ from what is generally believed or accepted in traditional conservation theory and the idea of conceptual art. The first claim is that a conceptual artwork's materiality is more meaningful than is generally thought. Although seemingly irrelevant to the artist, the physical manifestation of the artwork not only reflects the time in which it was made, but also often underpins the content of the work. This relates to a second point, because as for much contemporary art in general, conceptual art is shaped and staged each time it is put together and presented. If these practices are considered to be a form of conservation, because they guarantee a work's continuation, this clashes with the required restrained character of the art conservator's role. However, these actions are essential to keep conceptual art alive. This leads to a third claim: conservation treatments and installation processes are important research tools and dynamic sources for technical art history, in particular for conceptual work that has no physical remnants after display. These claims are illuminated by assessing conservation treatments and in the installation processes of conceptual art from the 1960s and 1970s, with works from Ger van Elk, Joseph Kosuth, and Jan Dibbets, each representing different types of conceptual art.

Central to this study is the artwork in physical transition. Not only are changes in meaning and material analysed by considering the *object* in a biographical context, but the conservation-based *activities* are carefully assessed. In this way, traditional object-based research in conservation studies, supported by materials science and art history, becomes enriched with process-based research, acknowledging the inevitability of personal input through methods imported from the social sciences. An autoethnographic approach is proposed as a new research tool in conservation, introducing a *conservator's testimony*, to encourage continuous critical thinking both about the way conceptual artworks continue their lives over time, and instigate an inherent reflexive stance on the part of the conservator, which would also be of significance for the profession of conservation in general.