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The Artist Interview and Installation Practices as Art Technological Sources for Contemporary Art

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The artist interview has become an important source in the conservation of contemporary art.1 Moreover, an interview during the installation of an artwork could even be considered a new research tool in conservation. First hand information is generated while the artwork’s possible manifestations are explored in dialogue with the artist. This was experienced with the installation, interpretation and documentation practices of Jan Dibbets. All shadows that occurred to me in… are marked with tape from 1969, a conceptual and variable artwork with a site-specific character.2

Installing a complex artwork in co-operation with the artist is the best opportunity to get to know an artwork inside out. One is situated on the crossroads of translating the artist’s ideas into a physical manifestation, a crucial position for a conservator with a responsibility for the proper management of the artwork’s appearance in the future.

Jan Dibbets’ All shadows… is physically destroyed after each exhibition and then waiting to be reinterpreted again. The choices and adjustments that are made during each installation moment, so crucial for the final result, are rarely ever documented, since documentation practices generally start after an artwork is finalized. However, during the moment of materialisation significant data are negotiated, particularly if the physical appearance is only temporary. Thus the installation practice itself becomes an important source of information, especially when this is combined with an artist interview, making the final appearance an authorised version.

For full comprehension of the potential meaning, optical effect and behaviour of materials, it is essential that conservators are involved in the installation process of contemporary art. Moreover, they make sure that crucial information about the artwork’s production is accurately recorded, including all decision-making, in order to guarantee a rightful articulation of the artwork in the future.

The documentation of Jan Dibbets’ All shadows… should make clear that the final form of the artwork is open-ended, akin to a lot of contemporary artworks that are not restricted to one single form. For All shadows… a thoroughly annotated transcription of the artist interview and the discussions during the installation process turned out to be an effective way of documentation, which included a critical reflection on the conservator’s own role in relation to the outcome.

The artist’s statements could be analysed in combination with what was noted in practice, which explained what was really meant, because what was stated was immediately put to the test in practice. Both the artist interview and the process of installation could therefore be considered dynamic art technological sources. In conjunction with archival and comparative research, these practices offer unique insight in the dialogue between concept and material. When these dynamic sources are captured in documentation, the conservator’s own role should be made explicit and reflected upon in order to be transparent about his mediating role in the installation process and the potential impact of the documentation in the future. After all, the documentation and the reinstallations procedure itself could be considered new forms of conservation for ephemeral art, because these are, in effect, guiding the artwork into the future. By putting forward the role of various stakeholders in this process, it is aimed to leave a transparent view of the artwork’s concept, while passing it on to the future - shaping the ongoing biography of the artwork, along with the documented transformations of the work of art in progress.

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