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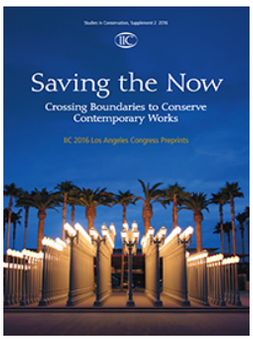

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Autoethnography as a new approach in conservation

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This paper proposes autoethnography as a new approach for conservators. It allows for a process-based assessment that foregrounds the conservator's personal input during conservation treatments and installation procedures. It addresses the cognitive processes that steer towards the desired result in a chain of micro-level decisions. Two examples relating to the work of conceptual artist Jan Dibbets illustrate the approach. One provides insight into the conservator's deliberations during a conservation treatment, the other demonstrates the co-constructed nature of the artist interview as a negotiated text. These conservator's testimonies include and enforce the reflexivity that is needed to remain critical, not only when managing complex artworks. The methodological approach of autoethnography enriches the conservation of cultural heritage in general.

Keywords: Artist interview, Autoethnography, Conservation theory, Conservator's testimony, Documentation, Conservation methodology, Reflexivity, Jan dibbets

Introduction

Many contemporary artworks are shaped and staged each time they are put on display or made manifest. To analyse the interpretations and unavoidable alterations that arise on each occasion, the approach of a 'cultural biography' has been adopted. It traces the artwork's life in order to determine its identity, instead of pursuing a quest for a supposedly original state (van de Vall *et al.*, 2011). This biographical model not only serves contemporary artworks with variable and performative features, but also suits traditional artworks, since it is recognized that all artworks change over time. However, while this model provides insight into an artwork's life from a socio-cultural background, the concept of biography should not be misunderstood as a vehicle simply for accepting the inevitability of change, as it is not normative. The biographical approach recognizes that objects change over time, as does their social context. It does not, however, provide solutions for complex issues in conservation. Accepting change *per se* is not what conservation is about, but managing change is. This calls for a process-based approach in conservation rather than the traditional object-based attitude. Such an approach should include a critical assessment of the conservator's own role in the conservation process and consequence for the object's biography. Autoethnography could provide this as it acknowledges personal input and at the same time seeks to learn from the way the research subject is assessed in order to advance the research itself. Being critical of personal involvement complies with the conservator's required restrained attitude, and recognizes how a chosen conservation strategy is determined to a large extent by the context in which conservation takes place.[1]

Autoethnography and reflexivity

Autoethnography is a self-reflexive qualitative research method from the social sciences which foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity. Reflexivity refers to the mutually affecting or cyclic relationship between cause and effect. In conservation autoethnography implies conservators describing how the object affects their actions while at the same time considering how their actions affect the object. Autoethnography is thus directed towards dialogue and critical thinking, and offers 'lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions' as Ellis and Bochner indicated (2000, p. 744). It is an open approach, which allows for the possibility of making different decisions, and adopting other viewpoints, under diverse circumstances. Because of its reflexive nature it is effective as a contemplative approach and as a comprehensive documentation

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[1]This article is based on my doctoral thesis on working with conceptual art works, eliciting critical reflections on the conservator's involvement in artworks and putting a lens on the conservation profession (Stigter, 2016).

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method. Although reflexivity is often used interchangeably with critical reflection, it differs in promoting critical awareness of how knowledge is created (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007). Being reflexive as a researcher allows one to look beyond the established paradigm (Crouch, 2007, p. 109). Thus, being reflexive accommodates exploring new ways to approach the problems that contemporary art poses in the field of conservation.

The double function of autoethnography, reflecting on personally induced processes while controlling and advancing them, and making this accountable in documentation, is characteristic of the method. As Duncan pointed out: 'it can be considered constructive and differs from the type of analysis conducted by researchers who remain outside the situation they are investigating and who have no opportunity to create change directly in the research setting' (Duncan, 2004, p. 7). This suggests that when conservators pursue an autoethnographic approach, they are much more in control of judging their own actions, encouraged to recognize their own impact on the artwork and staying critical of their intervention, thus remaining open to new views and other strategies.

Retrospective reflection and reflexion

An autoethnographic account makes dilemmas in conservation explicit while engaging with the impact of conservation. It not only documents which actions are taken and how they are executed, but also specifies why. Moreover, it is 'a form that will allow readers to feel the moral dilemmas, think with [the] story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points', as Ellis and Bochner explained (2000, p. 735). This is especially useful for conservators who will face similar challenges in the future. Characteristics of the method are a first-person narrative, often in the present tense, identifying elements of discomfort, and using 'thick descriptions' (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). These invite the reader to participate in considering the problem, following both the line of reasoning and the way in which this translates into the course of action. This is demonstrated in the author's retrospective autoethnographic account of a conservation treatment on *Rubens Diptych III* (1993–1994), a painted photowork by Dutch conceptual artist Jan Dibbets (1941) (Example 1). The work consists of two more than life-size paper-covered panels, each painted and with the same cut-out of a chromogenic print of part of a painting pasted to it. The print shows part of the background of a painting by the Flemish baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens, which in Dibbets' composition has been brought to the foreground; foregrounding the idea of the background in painting (Fig. 1).

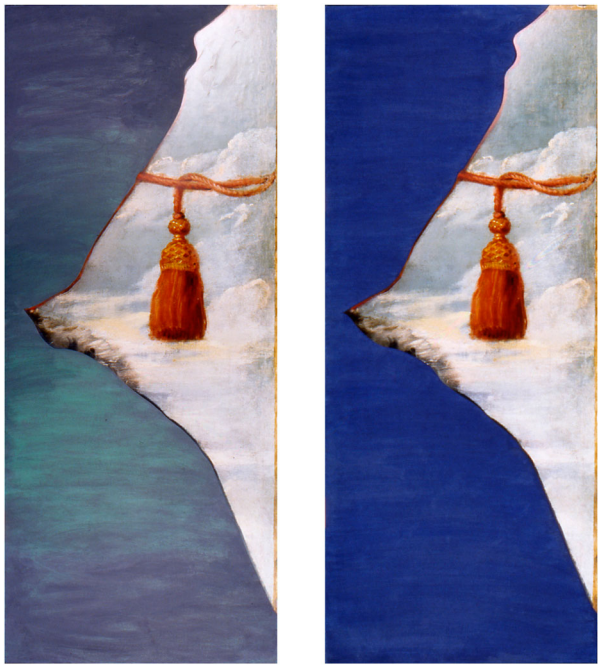

Figure 1 Jan Dibbets, ***Rubens Diptych III*** **(1993–1994), chromogenic prints and watercolour on melamine-faced paper-covered panels, 225.5 × 93 × 2 cm each. Collection Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, 04709 a-b. © Sanneke Stigter/SRAL.**

Example 1: Retrospective reflection

Maastricht, 6 November 1998

My first intervention ever is going to be the removal of a flyspeck. In preparation I make a swab out of a bamboo stick of which I carve the tip into an extremely thin end. I wrap only a few cotton wool fibres around it, rolling them between my fingers. This will allow me to use the minimum amount of moisture necessary to engage with the debris in order to lift it and minimize the chance of damage to the possibly water sensitive paint layer. I take a new scalpel blade from its package, slide it onto the scalpel holder and place it on my trolley cart together with the other instruments, waiting to be used.

Then I cover the area around the damaged paint layer with a soft paper tissue to protect the surface, much like a green surgery drape that covers the body of a patient in the operating room. The paper-covered panel lies flat on a table. I position a microscope over the panel and focus it. I place my gloved right hand on the tissue holding the surgical scalpel, while I support it with my left to secure its position. Then I reach for the flyspeck with the scalpel. Overlooking my own actions through the microscope, I slowly approach the insect's excrement on the artwork. My hand trembles a little, afraid to harm the work of art. I hold back and pause,

until I feel confident enough to start interfering. Then I finally touch the side of the debris and the scalpel blade moves gently into the flyspeck. I hold my breath while touching the brown substance, so intimately attached to the artwork.

It appears that the excrement has nestled between the paper fibres and is stuck into the paper structure. Small particles of the foreign material come loose when I touch it with the scalpel's tip. I alternate the use of the scalpel with the specially prepared swab to lift the excrement particles and remove them from the surface. At one point a paper fibre moves. This happens right before my eyes, under extreme magnification. My own hand had just caused a change in the original material. Although not visible with the naked eye, at this moment I realise that not all of the insect's excrements can be removed. Eventually I thin down the flyspeck, a professional way of describing partial removal, for instance when a thin layer of yellowed varnish is left on a painting. Finally the flyspeck is removed to the extent that I can no longer reach the remnants. I decide to stop intervening, hoping that the remnants of the flyspeck will not harm the artwork in the future. At least the flyspeck is no longer aesthetically disturbing to the monochrome paint layer.

(Stigter 2016).

This close reading reveals the cognitive process that steers the continuous micro-level decision-making towards the desired result. Exploring doubts is especially effective since it exposes the fundaments of the reasoning and allows for a better insight into how choices are made. This will help conservators who get to treat the object in the future prepare for what to expect, for instance concerning the way in which materials react, or what effect certain actions may result in.

While retrospective critical reflection and post-treatment evaluation of process and results are highly informative and serve to improve the quality of conservation interventions, ideally a reflexive approach is internalized as part of the conservator's skill set and used *during* the process of intervention itself. Then it can fulfil the role of an extra critical eye, stimulating one to regularly step back and observe one's own actions, and deliberate the possibility of adjustments. A reflexive stance allows for strategic action and the development of tactics during the process of intervention, including moments of in-between decisions, in which the conservator anticipates the possible results. This part of the process is illustrated in a fragment of an annotated transcript from an artist interview with Dibbets about his variable installation *All shadows that occurred to me … are marked with tape* (1969) (Example 2). This installation consists of masking tape stuck on the walls and floor of a room marking a succession of areas which are lit as the sun moves past a window in the wall over the course of the day (Fig. 2).

Example 2: Reflexion

Amsterdam, 22 August 2015

I show Dibbets a photograph of the wall label that was used for All shadows … *the last time it had been exhibited. In a previous interview he had expressed his disapproval when the museum had adapted the title using 'us' instead of 'me', since he had not been involved in the installation process. This time the label says 'me' again: 'All shadows that struck me in the Kröller-Müller Museum on 8 July 2013, 1969 (execution 2013).'*[2] *When reading the label Dibbets starts making fun of the addition 'execution 2013'*:

JD: [Jokingly:] As if the taped lines have been there for 40 years long!

I keep silent.

He goes on, and then I suddenly hear him say:

JD: And they made: 'All shadows that struck me!' No! It is not 'me' [chuckles].

I raise my eyebrows. He says exactly the opposite of what he said last time. My mind starts scanning interview techniques, considering the possible consequences of my next question. Should I keep silent and just record what he says, I would allow for this inconsistency. Should I interrupt, I would force Dibbets to review his opinion. Either way, my decision contributes to the outcome. I decide to have the problem solved and confront Dibbets with the apparent contradiction:

SS: Last time they [the Kröller-Müller Museum] used: 'us': 'that struck us'.

JD: Yes.

SS: Are you suggesting having them do the same again?

JD: Yes. Look, I made it as 'me', of course, but since they have it, and I no longer make it, 'me' is not there.

[2]In Dutch: *Alle schaduwen die mij zijn opgevallen in het Kröller-Müller Museum op 8 juli 2013*, 1969 (uitvoering 2013).

Figure 2 Jan Dibbets, ***All shadows that occurred to me on Good Friday 2009*** **(1969), masking tape, dimensions variable. Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 131.297. © Sanneke Stigter/Kröller-Müller Museum.**

SS: Really?

JD: Yes.

SS: Because last time we spoke about it …

Meanwhile following where I was getting at, Dibbets interrupts me.

JD: Yes. It could be 'me', no problem. But if they are so precise as to specify 'execution 2013', then 'me' cannot have anything to do with it.

SS: No. Ok. Because you said you thought it was a bit of a communal thing: 'that struck us'.

JD: Yes, I do. No, 'struck us' is crazy too.

Shifting the emphasis to another word in the title, 'struck', gave him the time to reflect on the issue of whether or not to use the first person singular in the title when he is no longer involved in the art making process. He continues by asking himself this question in order to review his previous statement:

JD: But, eh … , I mean: how do you solve this? [Slowly and in a soft voice:] 'All shadows that occurred to me … '

He listens carefully to his own words.

I keep silent.

Then he firmly answers the question:

JD: I would say 'me'; 'that occurred to me'. The statement is 'me', you cannot deny that. Instead of them thinking that they could make a better statement out of it …

(Dibbets, 2015; Stigter, 2016).

This example demonstrates that the researcher is steering the interview and mediating the outcome, including the way this has been made accountable in the narrative. By critically reflecting on my own role as the conservator involved, probing questions and refuting the artist's statements during the interview, I clarified in annotations that it was me who drew Dibbets' attention to the word 'me' in the title. Had I not brought it up, it would never have been the subject of discussion. This reveals the conservator's direct involvement in articulating hitherto unarticulated features of the artwork, pointing to a level of interference that outlines the conservator's responsibility of acting restrained.

Moreover, the information is framed with annotations geared towards revealing the co-constructed nature of the research results. Indeed, as Fontana and Frey indicated, when using interviews: 'The researcher has a great deal of influence on what part of the data will be reported and how it will be reported' (2000,

p. 660). Thus, the conservator's involvement not only resides in mediating ideas about the artwork during the interview, but also in producing a source when annotating the transcript: the result is a negotiated text.

The self-reflexive characteristic of autoethnography generates a conscious elucidation of decisions and alternatives driven by questioning the approach that is personally pursued. Therefore, the resulting account is not just a personal observation, but one generated through critical reflection and concern. This is particularly important for ephemeral artworks for which choices are made continuously. A conservator's testimony will be the only evidence left of the logic behind the work's previous manifestations, once it is completely dismantled (Stigter, 2015). This requires the reflexivity that demonstrates that, even though decisions are based on thorough research, they are also a form of constructed knowledge, putting the conservator's role into perspective.

Transparency as reversibility

The idea behind the conservator's testimony in an autoethnographic approach is that the conservator's actions are traced in close detail so that choices and adaptions along the way are made transparent. Moreover, the autoethnographic account invokes the desired sense of personal responsibility in current interventions while it provides future conservators with an 'intellectual tool' to understand previous practices, while simultaneously invoking the desired sense of responsibility that is passed on to the next professional involved.

Therefore, the biographical approach in conservation studies can be enriched by autoethnography. It obviates the lack of normativity that is needed for decision-making in conservation, and both the process and the account form tools during treatment and serve as documentation for the future conservators. Ellis and Bochner explain this additional function: 'Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand and cope with' (2000, p. 742).

This suggests that a conservator's testimony may even be considered as a contemporary substitute of reversibility in situations where reversibility is irrelevant or not achievable, as with variable and ephemeral artworks. Apart from providing insight into the processes that mediate the work towards future appearances, it encourages critical thinking with the next person involved each time the work is about to be made manifest, so that an artwork's manifestation can be critically judged and 'mentally undone', in order to be able to either build on the foundations laid in the past or opt for a different strategy.

Conclusion: state of mind

The large framework of conservation research, advocating a holistic approach, can benefit from the autoethnographic method because it allows for a better understanding of the changes in an artwork's continuous biography. An autoethnographic approach seems a natural fit to the conservator, suiting the restrained attitude that conservation ethics prescribe. Being reflexive is not an extra effort, but a 'state of mind' (Bolton, 2010, p. 3). By making all choices and dilemmas during the process of conservation explicit by expressing doubts, fears, and unexpected turns, a valuable document of historical interest is created.

Thus, a conservator's testimony in an autoethnographic approach not only results in a critical account of the process of intervening with the artwork from first-hand experience, but it also serves as an active tool to engage the reader and encourage reflexive thinking. It elicits critical awareness with future conservators about their roles in the artwork's life, making them assess their own reading of the artwork and question their decisions, while intellectually it demands others in turn to leave a similar testimony of interpretations made and actions performed. A conservator's testimony leaves and imposes the reflexivity that is needed in conservation, not only for complex artworks but for conservation of cultural heritage in general.

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