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Conservation as care: some questions

Jeltsje Stobbe



What is care?

In 2015, the Zuid-Afrikahuis in Amsterdam was intensely renovated. Renovation included not only the 17th century building itself, where it was the object of months of scraping it empty and re-stuffing, but also the archives collection. Renovating is restoring and redecorating in one go; the former attunes to putting things back in the states they supposedly were in, while the latter is putting things just a little differently than before, or painting them in a slightly different style. The renovation of the archives was a re-inventory: in line with ‘good’ archiving practices, order shaped by the contexts was to be respected, yet at the same time, files got new descriptions – a makeover, so to say. Doctors and wives became two different names, and humans formerly known as ladies were baptised into surnames – sometimes even in titles. Renovating archives is as much about how it was as it is about how it should have been. To be more precise, it is about how it was *as well*.

In 2018 there was a meeting on archives. The location doesn’t matter, except for it being in place A – a city famous for its history of protest and colonialism. Faces of good intentions were all around, a meeting of archivists, artists and academics; what could possibly go wrong? A discussion started about the colonial archives – archives of the colonial empires. A young guest researcher of the host institute pointed out a poignant issue: she stated that the archives of the host were presented in a colonial way in the online catalogue, reinforcing colonialism and not allowing different stories to have a place. The host replied that they could do nothing about these archives being colonial; to write colonialism out of

them was simply not feasible. The only alternative he could see was to *not* present them, to keep them out of sight in storerooms or to maybe even throw them away.

The guest researcher responded that the actual archives were not the issue; archives also existed in the country where she was born and raised and provided useful information that she was interested in and write about, regardless of or against the archiver. The issue was with the *descriptions* of the files in the archive; the descriptions of the archivists, who provide aids to their archival findings for those interested in finding bits and pieces for their stories. The host was clearly surprised about this answer and could not wrap his head around it; descriptions were as they were, this was the way to do it. The issue was not with the descriptions; descriptions were simply objective lines of ... exactly that, 'descriptions of the files.'

It is a common thing in *archivesland* to stick to the old descriptions of the archive files in order to stay "true to the catalogue" (Kunst 2018). At the same time, it is also a good practice to make new ones, to make different connections, for re-inventory. This re-inventorying is not the same as revising; it is about bringing out what is easily absented, as in the mentioned example with the women's names and titles in the Zuid-Afrikahuis archives. It is not about writing out one thing and writing in another; the absence and the presence may at times even depend on each other. But what happens when the object is not a fuzzy text file, but something which is supposedly more tangible and singular as a photo?

Conservation as care?

While cleaning out the attic of the Zuid-Afrikahuis for the renovation project, a couple of boxes fell literally in front of our feet. The boxes contained series of lantern slides about South Africa about what seemed the first half of the twentieth century. The first slide we pulled out was that about an army general. The other slides seemed to be about promoting, even branding, South Africa. There were no stories about war, just images to stimulate travellers' imaginations. Almost all the slides had one or more numbers. Most slides had small papers glued to them with text written in one language or multiple languages (Afrikaans, English, Dutch) which explained to the person handling the magic lantern what was to be seen. The numbers and the small papers made it obvious that the slides had some conservation and use history. The glued pieces of paper brought up the same issue as the archive example at the beginning of this text: old titles or new titles, what to do?

A good exercise in de-scribing would be to start with the prescriptions; what would the slides allow or forbid? As mentioned, many slides had more than one paper description glued to their surfaces. These papers had short descriptions involving multiple nouns or short statements on what was to be seen. One could argue that the slides and their

statements permit the description of what is deemed visible and forbid the description of what is not to be seen. Yet, as is to be seen further on (Jansen, this volume), a space is needed to negotiate this description. Instead of de-description, it seemed better to leave it up to re-inscription, to attune to the complication, to look at the "folding" so to say (Akrich & Latour 1992).

So here they were, in front of our feet, these boxes with dust and slides. The box as such is considered an act of conservational care. Conservators tend to keep lantern slides in their original wooden boxes 'as this is just the best way to keep them', as it often goes. Until it no longer works: caring for the cracks and fractures means bringing the slides to a restorer, caring for the images, to a photographer. The degradation of slides is irreversible while digital photos may outlive the slides. Another aspect in beating degradation is to put the slides in clinically solid and dust-free boxes.



The next step is for the archivists to put the slides out there, online, in such a way that they are openly accessible. The doctrine of open data strongly depends on data being available to everyone. This way anyone can then decide what to do with the data for themselves. Making this possible is in itself usually seen as an act of care. Yet, is putting the slides out in the open really an act of care? Should they be online, for whom is this relevant, who would make it sad or angry, or maybe just indifferent? Just throwing them online *as is*, these slides of South Africa, seems more like *a lack of care*, because what is a historical object for one is an ongoing and painful present-past for another (Aïsha Azoulay 2019; Aïsha Azoulay 2020; Stoler 2013).

The slides as is would include the original descriptions on the glued pieces of paper. As database fields make for short descriptions, de-descriptions as reworkings of the original titles

lure: it is easy to make variants of an existing text. A way to engage with the slides *as is* then, is to open up the process of putting titles in fields – to in-scribe, to create space to negotiate, and to open up at least the possibility for an act of care for the slides that go beyond the wooden box.

Kinds of care

What kind of cares are there to be practised in the world of archives? First of all, there is care in the form of critique: the example of how things might have been *as well* otherwise, when one shifts categories – let's say our wives-to-names example for archival titles (also Van Dooren 2014, 293, with references). Then there is the violence-care of conservation of wildlife; in the land of the archives, this would translate into continuously killing the small animals while clinically climatizing the area to care for the archives – continuously; this is because silverfish outlive paper. There is also the affective care as an "ethical obligation" and as a "practical labour", of how to cope with what is at hand to bring out the "specificities of knowing practices" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012); in *archivesland*, this may be more of a "capacious" care, a Humanities Studies kind of care which is capable of coping with the vast amounts of online data as it does with the small things and histories in regular Humanities fashion (Nowwiskie 2015). Conservation as care is then not so straightforward as it may seem at first sight.

Let's look at two examples of what is usually seen as good archival care and how this may be opened up further. The first instance is descriptive titles. Although the title description of an archival object is usually seen as a standard and objectifying routine, descriptive titles can also be seen as innately radical; this is because their standardised form makes it possible for everyone to access them (Darms 2015). Making standardised descriptions and metadata in this manner is seen as a practice of good conservational care.

Yet, in practice, things may be slightly different. Although the distribution of the archives over the internet has been, since its inception, visualised as an open and free flow of knowledge – as in: independent of its original privileged "archontic" space (Lynch 1999), the way its metadata travels along and may change is usually less discussed. Standardised descriptions may change on the go, metadata may no longer cohere as intended by an archivist who put it out in the world. Stories which are made possible through such descriptive titles and metadata change with them as well. Both titles and data may arrive differently, maybe even separately, at newly configured spaces (Law 2002). The idea of a standardised form is then not necessarily related to the open and accessible character of online archives.

The second example is an archival acknowledgement of levels of comfort. Researchers

have often asked the question whether we must critique what we love. Yes, "[t]his would be a kind of affectively and ethically engaged scholarship", to be critically analytic about what one loves as an academic (Van Dooren 2014, 293, with references) or what one loves as a professional, amateur, or any other kind of interested wanderer for that matter. But what is to be done in the case of archives that make one slightly uncomfortable yet are somehow enticing at the same time? Photos are sly actants in recognition processes, in bringing memories about, even if one has ambivalent feelings about the archive (see Faber Jonker, this volume).

One way to go forward is to warn the archive is enticing. Another way is to use this seduction of archival fragments productively. As Tortorici proposes, "...while all archives have the potential to seduce us, the fragments and absences have an even greater potential to seduce than do complete cases, narratives, and testimonies found within the archive" (Tortorici 2015). A seductive archive is then both fragmental presences of "lived experience" and "indexical absences" or "historiographical ghosts" (Tortorici 2015).

To work with fragments and absences is a move away from the usual notion of 'present' and 'absent' records, the conventional search for a 'complete picture', the 'single historical story on all the evidence available'. The archive then may be seen as a productive counterbalance to 'History' as it is often practiced, as an archive "complicates" instead of "sound-bites" (Darms 2015). A care for conservation is then as much about coping with levels of uncomfortableness and seduction as with this complexity.

To crop or not to crop

What to do with the original titles then, the ones which linger in-between the past and a painful story? Do we keep the original titles of the slides somewhere, in a field 'original titles'? Or should they be meta-dated out of an online catalogue all together as it will be difficult to maintain a certain coherence between titles and contextualisation in the open flow through the internet? The titles are visible on the slides themselves as well: to crop or not to crop the digitized version of a slide? Stay close to an objects' biography; or write the history out of its future? Or opt for a middle road: to make a distinction between what goes online and what stays in a local database (Kunst 2018)?

Also, in what way do the analogue slides change when modelled into digital images (Dellmann 2019)? What happens when the slides get translated from boxes to data fields and how does that inform their role as actants in knowledge production? Will they be made to act as part of a collection or as separate, singular items? What is a collection of digital images anyway: de-contextualised and fragmented raw data, a scholarly curated collection in need of peer review or a space of possibility for new uses (Muller 2014)?

These questions have led us to not engage on our own, but to invite those that use archives in their daily academic or professional work ‘to have a look’. To open up the process of thinking with the slides, a group of authors – drawing on archives, working with archives and archivers themselves – has been invited to browse through the slides digitally, to select one or more slides and to write an essay about it. Some authors have taken up a historical, genealogical or contemporary approach while others focus on the fleshy specificities of the slides themselves; all have browsed through them, examining them from up close, taking a distance, staying with them and experiencing various levels of (dis)comfort.

Slides to think with

The various and varying stories in this volume make it possible to think about the slides. The way the authors have engaged with the slides open up various issues related to conservation as care. Here, two are featured.

One issue that comes up is *findability*. A strong argument for keeping out-dated labels ‘somewhere’ is that these facilitate ‘findability’ and therefore, need a presence – even if this is only as a searchable term which becomes replaced by an agreeable and inclusive term once the search button is pressed (Kunst 2018). The old titles may be something one does not want to find, but when entered, they can serve as keywords of the past, as entrances to practicing alternate histories with new words.

Another issue is the *design* of online collections. These may be ‘taken by their users as memorializing, conservative, limited and suggestive of a linear view of history rather than as problem-solving engines, branching, generative and non-teleological’, leading to a plea for *speculative* instead of *special* collections (Nowviskie 2019). Worldly uncertainty may condition future archivistship, yet this is all the more reason to create possibilities to ‘activate imaginations’ and to ‘admit alternate futures’ by shifting from archives as ‘receivable content’ to archives as ‘usable technology’ (Nowviskie 2019). This not only involves working with the ‘actual archives’, but also the ‘impossible archival imaginary’, the absent records which next to present ones allow for alternate futures with speculative timelines (Gilliland and Caswell 2016; Nowviskie 2019; also, Tortorici 2015).

These matters of concern bring up the labour of the archivists. It has become quite popular to ‘celebrate the archive and all the things that “the archive” apparently encompasses’ (Eichhorn 2015). The celebration of the daily practices of *doing* archives is less discussed. Nonetheless, the way of coping with this daily mess is exactly what is at stake when thinking about conservation as care. This volume is the first attempt to collectively cope with caring for the collections of the Zuid-Afrikahuis.

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