Collecting archives of objects and stories

On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum

Wielocha, A.B.

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction

Process Art: Objects and documents

In 2014, just weeks before the opening of a large exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, where I worked as conservator, a new artwork was donated to the museum. It was to be included in the upcoming exhibition, but first required conservation treatment.¹ The piece turned out to be a three-dimensional model of a head, made in unfired ceramic clay. The sculpture seemed to be a work-in-progress, still exhibiting the traditional armature made up of pieces of clay and wooden crosses tied together with metal wires. Likewise, the back had been left unfinished, as if the creative process had come to a halt. The core of the work was made of a random assortment of materials – aluminium, wood, an old printed circuit board with some electronic components – lashed together with plastic tape (Figure 1-2). The overall material condition of the sculpture was poor: the surface was covered with mould, the metal wires corroded, and various pieces of clay had come detached from the structure. As the objective of the planned conservation treatment was to ‘make the sculpture presentable for exhibition’, and time was running out, I started the preparations by collecting information about the artwork’s history and meaning.

The sculpture turned out to be the result of a collaboration between Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski, two internationally acclaimed Polish artists, known for their participatory art projects relinquishing traditional criteria of authorship to create temporary creative communities. The sculpture was created during the project ‘Tribute to Academy’, a workshop that the two had organised at a gallery space of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, the school from which they had graduated and

Figure 1-2. Artur Żmijewski, Pawel Althamer *The Visit of Professor Zemla*, general view. Photographer: César Delgado Martín. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw.
where the tradition of craftsmanship is still an important aspect of the teaching process. Althamer and Żmijewski invited professors, students and alumni to work together on one piece – a drawing, a painting or a sculpture. The everyday hierarchy of the academic institution was suspended for the duration of the project, as all participants were invited to immerse themselves in a common artistic adventure, after agreeing that all artworks created in the studio could be changed by others. The video documenting the event shows that the sculpture later donated to the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw was a joint collaboration between various artists and their former professor, Gustaw Zemla, and thus a confrontation between radical, experimenting artists and their former teacher – a traditional sculptor and a proponent of the conventional approach to fine arts education (Figure 3). When comparing the stills from the video documenting the last moments of joint sculpting with the work’s current form, I was able to see that the process of working on the sculpture had continued even after the official event was over.

I am a traditionally trained conservator and the principles guiding my work have always been bound to the assumption that the integrity of an artwork is linked both to ‘artist’s intent’ and to the original or authentic appearance of the work. But who was the artist in this case? And was there any original, completed version of the work to which I could have related as a conservator? The authors had created the

---


3 I received training in conservation and restoration of paintings and wooden polychromed sculptures from the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art, Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in Poland, where conservation was taught in line with Italian tradition inspired by writings of Cesare Brandi (e.g.: Brandi, 2005) and aestheticism with the emphasis on technical and analytical skills.
artwork alongside other participants in the artistic action, and even after this action was over there had been subsequent interventions by other individuals. Furthermore, in a personal conversation, Artur Żmijewski made clear that for him, it was the process of creating the sculpture, and the interaction between the participants in the action and their former teacher, that constituted the ‘real’ work of art.¹

There was no intention to make the resulting physical object last, nor was there a predetermined artistic concept for any material outcome. The sculpture itself was a witness to the process and a document of the activity, and, therefore, had no original appearance.

Several possible scenarios were explored: was it better to abstain from any intervention on the part of conservators and show the sculpture in its current state, or, rather, to complete the sculpting process by making a plaster cast, as suggested by artists? On the one hand, taking into account the unstable microclimate in the exhibition space, there was a major risk that the high humidity could cause recurrence of the mould, which could in turn spread to other works in the show. Unfired clay is not a stable material.

¹ Żmijewski, A. (November 27, 2014). [Email to Agnieszka Wielocha]. The personal archive of the author.
and lack of intervention could have caused further shrinkage and loss. On the other hand, finishing the sculpture would have been highly dubious from an ethical perspective, and – if at all an option – would have required the artists’ involvement – a condition difficult to fulfil within the available time-frame. The eventual decision to opt for a third solution, consisting of the consolidation, cleaning and reattachment of loose parts of the work, was taken in collaboration with the curator of the show. The guiding aesthetic principle for the treatment of the work was to avoid making the sculpture look ‘too neat and clean’ and to preserve some of the roughness of the in-progress clay bozzetto (Figure 4). The curator decided to exhibit the piece on a rotating wooden stand similar to the one used in the original process of sculpting it (Figure 5-6). On display, the artwork consisted not only of the sculpture, but also of the video illustrating how it was created. After the show, the artwork was accessioned into the museum collection under the title *The Visit of Professor Zemla.* However, the museum purchased only the sculpture, while the video explaining the artwork and contextualising the artefact, on loan for the duration of the exhibition, was returned to its owner and not included in the museum’s holdings.

---


6 The video was created by cinematographer, director and screenwriter of documentary films Rafał Żurek and produced by the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. See: Żurek, R. (Cinematographer). (2013). ‘Cześć Akademii’ [unpublished]. Poland: Salon Akademii/ Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie. Copyrights: Artur Żmijewski, Paweł Althamer. Whereas in the opening credits of the film Żmijewski and Althamer are listed as ‘the authors’, the video is a separate, independent work. Interestingly, on the website of the International Film Festival Rotterdam it is featured under its English title as a short film by Żmijewski, distributed by Galerie Peter Kilchmann. See: https://iffr.com/en/2018/films/glory-to-the-academy.
My experience with this clay sculpture taught me that conventional principles of fine art conservation, oriented towards the preservation and restoration of physical material, are not always applicable to contemporary art. The authorship of the artwork might not overlap with the authorship of the physical object, and the same principle may apply to the ownership of both. What is presented to the public might be, to a certain extent, a product of the institution that collected the artwork, with or without the artist’s participation. And, finally, what conservators conserve might be just a piece of process documentation converted into a work of art through its musealisation. The treatment that the sculpture underwent on the premises of the Museum of Modern Art allowed for the stabilisation and significant prolongation of the life of the object, but it did not secure the preservation of the artwork as such. The sculpture itself does not fully convey the intent of the artists. In order to do so, it would need to be contextualised, for example by the video capturing the process behind its creation. And yet, although the video says more about the artwork than the material object (the sculpture itself), it was classified as a mere ‘document’ and not acquired together with the sculpture. All these issues trigger questions related to the role of the museum as a keeper of art: what does it mean to collect and preserve a contemporary work of art? What constitutes a contemporary work of art? Who has the authority over its ‘true’

---

7 What is here referred to as ‘conventional principles of fine art conservation’ overlaps with what others have called ‘traditional conservation practice’ (Laurenson, 2004) or ‘classical conservation’ (Muñoz-Viñas, 2005). A detailed summary of the development of the conservation field and the analysis of these two notions has been provided by van Saaze (2013, pp. 37–47).
shape and how to safeguard its identity for future generations? These are in many respects still under-researched questions – the very ones that have motivated me to undertake this study.8

Questions and Challenges

Contemporary art presents a challenge to traditional principles of conservation as a discipline. Similarly, it poses new problems for the preservation of artworks, considered one of the principal duties of the museum as a collecting institution. The issue is not new: the conservation of contemporary art began to emerge as a specialised field already in the 1980s, in response to growing difficulties with conserving the modern materials and new technologies increasingly embraced by artists.9 The rapid advance of the both practice-oriented and academic field of conservation, fostered by the acceleration of changes in art practices towards the end of the 20th century, has led to the development of various solutions designed to meet these challenges. As a result, new theoretical frameworks, models, tools and approaches have been formulated. However, while most of them take conservation practice as their starting point, few are in fact compatible with the museum ‘ecosystem’, and are, therefore, seldom implemented in collecting institutions. This gap between the fast-developing theory of contemporary art conservation and what can be described as the rigidness of institutional practice has yet to receive sufficient attention among researchers, and today, after more than two decades of discussions, enough time has elapsed to finally examine these issues in depth.

8 Among the established scholars associated with the field of conservation who have begun to tackle these issues are Erma Hermens, Vivian van Saaze, Hanna Hölling, Glenn Wharton, Iwona Szmelter, Sanneke Stigter, Pip Laurneson, Gunnar Heydenreich, Annet Dekker and Julia Noordegraaf. A comprehensive literature review as well as the history and development of the field are provided in Section 3 of this Chapter.

In this regard, the vantage point of this dissertation is the triangle of mutual relationships between an artist, a museum, and a contemporary artwork collected by the museum, investigating the condition of contemporary artworks in the museum environment – how they are collected, documented, cared for and conserved in today’s institutions. By examining the artist interview, one of the tools developed in the field of contemporary art conservation and its use in institutions that collect contemporary art, this study looks at how (and if) new methods are incorporated in the museum setting, and attempts to identify the factors that might undermine their potential and effectiveness. At the same time, this dissertation introduces more profound questions about the nature of contemporary artworks in relation to traditional museum structures, and traces the discrepancies between these two notions, while working towards a theoretical model that might help to bridge them. The ultimate goal of this study is to reflect critically on conservation praxis in museums that collect contemporary art and point towards potential improvements that allows for a better care and perpetuation of contemporary art.

As the example of The Visit of Professor Zemla shows, safeguarding the physical representation of the artwork does not guarantee its future conceptual integrity or legibility, which is contingent on information that contextualises the artefact. This study follows the premise that a contemporary work of art, rather than being a ‘thing in itself’, is best understood through a dialogue with the social sphere, and in consequence it needs to be collected and cared for as such. By mapping relations between contemporary artworks and the context of their creation, dissemination and musealisation, it explores this multifaceted interplay and argues that conservation cannot be accomplished without collecting the stories which narrate this complexity. I will argue that the gap between current institutional practice and the theoretical approaches developed in contemporary art conservation can be bridged only if museums adapt to the needs of contemporary art beyond the area of conservation. In other words, in order to effectively secure the continuation of contemporary artworks, the entire museum must adjust to the needs of this ‘new’ kind of art and engage actively in ensuring its perpetuation. I propose that this goal can be achieved by expanding the traditional notion of the collectible or the ‘musealium’ to include documentation as an
integral, constituent part, since documentation carries a major share of the identity of contemporary artworks, and allows for an understanding of the diverse ways they can be read, perceived and interpreted.\footnote{In this dissertation the notion of an ‘artwork’s identity’ is employed according of the definition established by Marta Garcia Celma and Brian Castriota for the revised Decision-Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation and Presentation, according to which “the identity of a work of art is a term employed in the conservation of contemporary art to refer to a work’s unique character and self-sameness. It is closely connected to the notion of significant properties, understood as the features or properties regarded as constitutive of that identity” (Giebeler, Sartorius, & Heydenreich, 2019, p. 24).}

This dissertation sets out from the premise that the structure of today’s museums and the notion of conservation that they employ do not fully match up with the needs of contemporary art, and thus aims to offer a solution that respects the central position of the collection as the foundation of the museum. This intention is followed by research on collaborations between museums and artists, with a special focus on the uses of the artist interview – a relatively new research tool in the field of contemporary art conservation. The definition of the artist interview and the conceptualization of the artwork’s documentation, both grounded in museum collection-related practices, constitute the key notions examined in this study. Instituting the two ‘model’ concepts – the artist interview and documentation – raises questions concerning the relationship between them. What are the functions and uses of the artist interview within the body of documentation of an institutionally collected contemporary artwork? This query guides the empirical portion of the study, which consists of the analysis of numerous case studies examining day-to-day practices in museums that collect contemporary art.

**Foundations and Contexts**

Specialisation in contemporary art conservation emerged in response to challenges posed by artists’ growing use of unconventional materials and new technologies throughout the 20th century. Although technical materials-oriented research is still an important part of the knowledge produced within the field, since the beginning of the 21st century, the focus has shifted towards concepts, meanings and processes, i.e. the immaterial features of contemporary artworks (Beerkens, 2016). Conventionally,
visual artworks have been perceived as fixed, unique, material entities that were created and finished at a particular moment in time, and traditional conservation theories were established according to these principles. Nevertheless, art produced during the last century has often resisted these tenets, and therefore undermines dogmas of conservation such as material authenticity, artist intent, reversibility, minimal intervention, and the conviction that the integrity of the object of conservation lies in its physical features, and therefore should be approached with the help of so-called ‘hard science’. This discrepancy and its practical impact on decision making has pushed scholars and practitioners working in the field to seek out theories, concepts and tools that support an effective approach to this ‘new’ kind of art and secure its continuation.

This dissertation builds on traditions in contemporary art conservation as a field of practice and study, and its achievements to date. The discipline was established primarily by conservation professionals working in or collaborating with museums and heritage organisations, but increasingly also involves academics and universities, who have now come to make up an important segment of the research community. The conservation dilemmas that arise from dealing with variable, changeable and process-based artworks have been addressed in numerous conferences, symposia, research projects and their resulting publications. The key event for my generation of conservators involved with 20th- and 21st-century art was the international symposium Modern Art: Who Cares? (MA:WC?, Amsterdam, 8-10 September 1997) and the resulting publication launched in 1999 and reprinted in 2005, which not only established the direction in which the field was to develop over subsequent decades, but also instituted an international community of professionals. A direct result of the symposium was the formation of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), an organisation put in place to coordinate the collection and exchange of information on


modern artists and their work.\textsuperscript{13} The event brought together professionals and scholars from inside and outside the conservation community: museum directors, curators, registrars, art historians and philosophers, establishing interdisciplinarity as a way of working and as a backbone for future discussions (Marontate, 1997). The publication introduced one of the first tools designed to help caretakers assess the condition of and design treatments for unconventional artworks: \textit{The Decision-Making Model for the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art} (1997), developed by the Dutch Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK). Notably, the model equates the actual physical condition of the art object with the impact of the artwork’s meaning on conservation-related decisions. Moreover, the symposium MA:WC? set the stage for early discussions around the inclusion of the artist in conservation decision-making through the use of artist interviews.\textsuperscript{14}

Following the example of MA:WC? the field of contemporary art conservation has continued to develop through research projects and symposia that, by engaging both scholars and professionals, have provided space to link together theory and practice through collaboration between universities, research institutes, professional organisations and museums. Another pivotal project touching upon issues discussed in this book was a three-year large-scale European research undertaking focused on the preservation and presentation of installation art, called \textit{Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art} followed by a concluding symposium,

\textsuperscript{13} For more information about INCCA see: www.incca.org. The network is discussed in Introduction, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{14} One of the conclusions from the project stemming the conference, as Dionne Sillé, manager of the project at the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art (Stichting Behoud Moderne Kunst; called often by its Dutch abbreviation: SBMK) stated in the introduction to the MA:WC? publication: “Interviews with artists are a key instrument in preventing conservation mistakes. The project showed that consulting the makers of an object produced valuable information. A separate study will therefore be devoted to this subject” (Hummelen & Sillé, 2005, p. 18). For more about the history of the artist interview for conservation purposes see: Chapter 1, p. 42.
Contemporary Art: Who Cares? (2010) and a publication (Scholte & Wharton, 2011).\textsuperscript{15} The key aspects of this project revolved around artist participation and documentation techniques and strategies, both of which are key to the arguments I will be presenting here.\textsuperscript{16} Through the inclusion of curators and museologists, the symposium opened up the field even further, specifically addressing the role of institutions in collecting, keeping and caring for contemporary artworks.\textsuperscript{17}

The profound reconsideration of the traditional paradigms of conservation, and their application in caring for contemporary artworks, was highly influenced by discourses from the sub-field of media (or time-based media) art conservation that emerged in

---

\textsuperscript{15} Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art launched in 2004, was supported by the European Commission’s Culture 2000 Programme, coordinated by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) and co-organised by five other European organisations: Tate (UK), Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf (Germany); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Spain); Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (Belgium); and Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK, the Netherlands). For more information and the results of the project see the report and the publication: Inside Installations. The preservation and presentation of installation art. Report, 2007; Scholte & Wharton, 2011. The international symposium Contemporary Art: Who Cares? was held in Amsterdam in June 2010, and was organised within another European project managed by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) entitled Practices, Research, Access, Collaboration, Teaching in Conservation of Contemporary Art (PRACTICs of Contemporary Art: The Future). For more about the symposium see: https://www.incca.org/events/symposium-contemporary-art-who-cares-2010, for more about the PRACTICs project see: https://www.incca.org/news/project-completed-practics-contemporary-art-future.

\textsuperscript{16} See, for instance: Heydenreich, 2011; Huys, 2011.

response to the growing use of cutting-edge technologies in artistic practice. Within this sub-specialisation, a particularly useful conceptual framework is that which conservator and researcher Pip Laurenson has established in her pioneering article *Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations* (Laurenson, 2006), to which I will refer frequently (see: Chapter 2). Laurenson replaces the reference ‘state’ of an art object with the concept of the ‘identity’ of an artwork, and by doing so makes it possible to perceive the ‘change’ in the artwork’s appearance and perception as something different from ‘loss’, as traditionally understood in conservation. Other approaches related to media art conservation that have inspired my thinking are those of artist, curator and scholar Jon Ippolito, new media art scholar Richard Rinehart and curator and media studies scholar Annet Dekker. These three academics introduced into the field of conservation a curatorial, but also, and more importantly, an artistic perspective on safeguarding today’s art. Moreover, by

18 The main platforms for research and development of best practices within this framework were Matters in Media Art: Collaborating Towards the Care of Time-Based Media (active since 2005), Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage Research Alliance (DOCAM) and Variable Media Network (1999-2003). *Matters in Media Art* was a collaborative project between three large museums: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and Tate, designed to help those who collect and keep media artworks. One of its outcomes is an online information resource on caring for media art; see: *Matters in Media Art*. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://mattersinmediaart.org/.

*DOCAM* (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage) was an international research alliance on the documentation and the conservation of media arts heritage, composed of around 20 institutional partners from around the world. One of the most significant results from the project was *The DOCAM Documentation Model*. The project was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Daniel Langlois Foundation. For more information see: Depocas, A., Le-Phat Ho, S., Bourbonnais, J., & Melançon, C. (n.d.). *DOCAM: Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage*. Retrieved from http://www.docam.ca/.


19 See e.g.: Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014 and Dekker, 2018.
addressing artworks with dependencies related to their digital nature, they positioned the task of preservation within the specificity of challenges and opportunities posed by the Information Age. Finally, significant advances in contemporary art conservation theory were achieved under the auspices of the Dutch project *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (2009-2015).* Various concepts established within this framework were used as starting points for the development of the argument presented here, among them the ‘biographical approach’ to capturing the artwork’s variability, which acknowledges not only that artworks change over time, but also advocates for interpreting these changes against the background of their social framework (van de Vall, Hölling, Scholte, & Stigter, 2011), and the notion of ‘artwork as an archive’ introduced by conservator and theorist Hanna Hölling (2013, 2015, 2018).

The aforementioned research networks, projects and collaborations shaped the scholarship of two further academics whose work has guided the path of my research. Firstly, cultural scientist and conservation theorist Vivian van Saaze, whose writings introduced the notion of ‘doing artworks’, founded on the assumption that through their practices art institutions are taking an active part in shaping works of art (2009a). Secondly, conservator and scholar Sanneke Stigter, who first mastered the artist interview in practice, has since offered courses on this method’s application in conservation education, and has developed a body of critical thinking around the

---

20 *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* was a project affiliated with Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Literature and Art, and led by Prof. Dr. R. van de Vall in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), partly funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). For more information see: Stigter, S. (2013). ‘Research in New Strategies in Conservation of Contemporary Art’. ICOM-CC MMCA Working Group Newsletter, 3, 8-9.
role of the conservator in shaping an artwork’s biography.\(^{21}\) Both of them advocate for the use of ethnographic methods in conservation-related research, a practice I have adopted by employing ethnography as one of my main research strategies.

The present project has been developed within a research and training network whose programme was conceived by the founders and participants of several preceding projects. As such, it can be seen as a continuation of these prior efforts to advance the field. The title of the network that this research is a part of – NACCA: New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art – refers directly to the scope of interests of its predecessors.\(^{22}\) My investigation is grounded in themes that NACCA has aimed to address – questions concerning the identity, values and authenticity of contemporary artworks, along with the organisation of institutional ecosystems and historically developed distinctions among the actors involved in caring for collections.

Although this study mainly adopts the perspective of conservation, it stands at the crossroads of other disciplines as well, in particular art history, art theory, museology, curatorship, performance, media and archival studies. In so doing, it aims to provide a broader overview of the problem, and to introduce standpoints that until now have not been present in discussions in the field of contemporary art conservation. Moreover, it aims to introduce conservation-related issues into discourses taking place in related fields, such as curatorial studies, and especially the innovative, critical approaches to the concept of museum grounded in New Institutionalism (see: Chapter 5).

---

\(^{21}\) See, for example: Stigter, 2016. The way the notion of ‘artwork’s biography is referred to in this dissertation requires explanation, as it is used differently in two disciplines that this book builds on, meaning art theory and conservation. For the first one, it might be seen as akin to W.J.T. Michell’s concept of ‘the life of images’. However, whereas Mitchell is interested in the movement and circulation of images, and in identifying their origin and societal impact (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2005), I focus on the lives and biographies of artworks, following the tradition of Conservation. The “biographical approach to contemporary art conservation” was proposed by Vall, R. van de, Hölling, H., Scholte, T., & Stigter, S. (2011). The idea of artworks having biographies allows us to account for their variability, while still respecting their artistic integrity. “Biographical approach is that the meaning of an object and the effects it has on people and events may change during its existence, due to changes in its physical state, use, and social, cultural and historical context” (van de Vall et al., 2011).

\(^{22}\) For more information about the project see: Quabeck & Wielocha, 2017.
Likewise, I have also taken up the interdisciplinary ties in the field of conservation established by my predecessors, such as the links to performance studies reflected in the work of Gabriella Giannachi, or the research projects of LIMA Amsterdam (see: Chapter 4).

Methods

The entangled interrelations of art museums’ backstage practices related to collecting, exhibition making, collection management and collection care are rarely discussed in the literature, and existing descriptions usually present a more stable and organised perspective. Reports on new approaches and solutions shared by employees of leading, large-scale contemporary art museums tend only to provide information about the outcomes of particular projects often in their pilot stages, and do not reflect the real, day-to-day workflows of an institution. Moreover, both artworks and art institutions are difficult to compare, and therefore studies generally cannot be applied across the board. In order to achieve a better understanding of the routine practices of museums related to collecting, classifying, documenting, presenting and conserving, which is necessary in order to achieve the objectives outlined above, this study employs a mixed-method approach, combining ethnographic methods with archival research.

Ethnographic methods are nowadays used broadly to study the inner mechanisms of diverse organisations and institutions, museums included. In particular, interviews and participatory observation have proven efficient in the case of both art understood as a socially constructed concept, and the art museum as an ecosystem or closed

---


However, it is important to mention that there are some outstanding examples of writings about museum practice backstage, such as In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde: An anthropologist investigates the contemporary art museum by curator Matti Bunzl (2014), or behind the scenes of curatorial practice such as (self)critical essay Coda: The Curatorial by Charles Esche (2013).
community with its inherent dynamics related to the distribution of power. Fieldwork, an intrinsic part of ethnographic research, allows for the observation and analysis of the practices embedded in day-to-day institutional work. Accordingly, much of my research was performed during secondments at partner institutions, principally the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen (Chapter 3) and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Chapter 4), as well as during a research residency at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Chapter 5).

The central motif of this study is the interview, and interviewing was one of my main methods of collecting data for analysis. Two different kinds of interviews were carried out during this investigation. The first is the artist interview, a method developed within the field of contemporary art conservation that, over the last decades, has become one of the main tools for conservation-oriented documentation and the basis for decision-making regarding conservation strategies (see: Chapter 1, p. 42). Artist interviews were both performed during the research, as well as examined among the primary sources kept in institutional records. As such, interviews were analysed from the perspective of content, production process and accessibility. The artist interview is presented in this book as an example of a novel method that complies with the theoretical development of the field of contemporary art conservation, and the case-based fieldwork examines if and how it is used as a tool, and how it functions as a source in the museums studied.

The second kind of interview is akin to what in qualitative analysis is called the semi-structured expert interview, conducted here mainly with museum professionals – curators, conservators, registrars, producers, art handlers, as well as other related specialists, such as studio managers, technicians, etc. This group of participants contributed to my understanding of the path taken by particular artworks, how they were musealised, and the institutional context that determined this process.

25 Ethnographic methods has been used to study museum practices by cultural anthropologist Sharon Macdonald (2001b) and sociologist Albena Yaneva (2003a, 2003b). Ethnography has been successfully used for studying conservation practices within the institutional framework by Vivian van Saaze (2009) and Sanneke Stigter (2016). A remarkable example of a similar approach is the ethnographic study conducted by anthropologist Mattl Bunzl at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (Bunzl, 2014).
A significant portion of the data analysed in this dissertation was collected through engagement with archival records. Archival research was carried out not only in all of the museums mentioned above, but also in other institutions worldwide, in New York (Museum of Modern Art), Paris (Centre Pompidou), London (Tate), Cologne (Museum Ludwig) and Otterlo (Kröller-Müller Museum). It is important to mention that the archival research consisted not only of analysis of the content, but also of reflection on the nature of the archives as such – their structure, gaps and accessibility. More than simply satisfying a series of queries, institutional records triggered a deep reflection on the role of the archive in constructing artworks’ identities and consequently in determining their future. Simultaneously, archives’ organisation often reflects the inherent dynamic of the hosting institution, and as such adds to the analysis of the institutional ecosystem. Observations related to the importance of the archive in relation to collected artworks and as a key to understand structures of hosting institutions laid the foundations for one of the axes of my argument.

As philosopher Renée Van de Vall argues, contemporary art conservation can only be approached through “a case-by-case method of ethical deliberation” (van de Vall, 2015a, p. 8), and this standpoint reflects the general tendency in the scholarship of the field. In line with this stance and on the basis of my previous research experience, the case-study approach was also chosen as suitable for this investigation. Tracing artworks by one artist collected by various institutions enabled the study of processes related to their musealisation, an overview of the practices of each institution studied, and their subsequent comparison. Each case study is approached as a potential conservation challenge to face, and possible solutions are discussed in the respective chapters. Each artwork was selected for analysis according to several criteria. Firstly, it must comply with the definition of contemporary art as presented in Chapter 1 (see: p. 36). Secondly, it must have been collected by a museum large enough to have an established structure, i.e. departmental divisions. Thirdly, at a certain moment in its history, preferably at the time of its analysis for the purpose of this dissertation, the artwork must have

---

26 The case-study approach has been used in research on contemporary art conservation by various scholars both from the field of conservation as well as from outside the discipline. E.g.: Marçal, 2018; Stigter, 2016; van Saaze, 2009a.
posed a conservation problem. 

Fourthly, it must prove difficult to classify within the traditional taxonomic systems both in formal terms (e.g. painting, sculpture, drawing, installation, video, etc.) and within the tradition of artistic movements and genres (e.g. conceptual art, participatory art, net-art, etc.). Fifthly, the artist must be alive, and must have been involved with the institution in connection with the artwork in question at some point in its history. Sixthly, the artwork must have an extensive track record of exhibitions.

The analysis of the future legibility and shifting perceptions of artworks used as case studies was performed in line with the hermeneutic interpretation of art as understood by philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. According to Gadamer, a work of art exists only in the private experience of an individual, i.e. when the encounter between the viewer and the work of art fosters a game of understanding what has been actually viewed and sensed (Czakon, 2016; Gadamer, 2004, 2007). Interpretation identified as an intimate game between the viewer and the artwork cannot lead to finite and final results, thus, there is neither a most accurate, or most appropriate interpretation of an artwork.

Structure and Outline

My interest in the problem of implementing novel practical and theoretical approaches to contemporary art conservation in museums originates in my own experience as a museum conservator and my acquaintance with the practices of other institutions acquired through countless conversations with colleagues from the field. Hence, the structure of the dissertation not only follows the development of the study, but also reflects and expands my intellectual involvement in and the growth of my comprehension of the researched environment.

The dissertation starts with the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), which defines four key concepts for the development of the argument: contemporary art, the artist interview, documentation and conservation. All definitions are grounded in the current

27 Here I refer to ‘conservation problem’ in line with the definition of conservation as presented in Chapter 1 (see: p. 81).
discourses of the relevant fields and supported by related literature. The discussions that accompany this defining of terms lead to the formulation of the research question guiding the study, which addresses the function of the artist interview within the body of documentation related to an artwork in an institutional collection.

The core of the dissertation is formed by three case-study chapters that compile data from fieldwork, literature review and archival research (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). Their order mirrors the course of the investigation, which was divided into two phases. Data collected during Phase I, described and analysed in Chapter 2, provide a basis for reflecting on institutional collaboration with artists in relation to the artworks collected, extracting key concepts and defining problems. In grounded theory methodology this phase is called ‘theoretical sampling’ – initial data collection without fixed a priori theoretical assumptions (Ruppel & Mey, 2017). Having a general research topic but no firm hypothesis to start with, this study began with exploring ‘familiar’ or ‘established’ cases that confirmed and supported, but also questioned, contradicted or rejected preliminary theoretical ideas. Three notions broadly discussed in theoretical conservation scholarship have been selected as starting points for this exploration: ‘artwork’s meaning’, ‘artist’s sanctions’ and ‘significant properties’. Each of them is tested against the case of an artwork by Mirosław Bałka in different institutional collections. By mapping the interplay between these three notions, this study identifies the main sites of tension that have posed challenges for museums tasked with caring for contemporary art. As we shall see, such tensions essentially arise through the classification systems employed by institutions, which distribute works of art between different realms of the museum, and through the relationship between artists and institutions. This observation led to the establishment of three focal points to guide further empirical investigation of museums (Phase II): artwork-related documentation, the internal organisation of a museum and its practices related to collection care, and collaboration with artists on their artworks held in the collection.

The choice of works by the Polish sculptor as case studies for the preliminary research was determined by my familiarity with Bałka’s oeuvre and previous successful collaborations (see: Chapter 2, p. 108).
The outcome of Phase II is presented in Chapters 3 and 4, which describe and analyse case studies carried out at various museums in Europe and the US. Both chapters scrutinise the condition of the contemporary artworks collected by museums, analyse institutional museum–artist collaboration practices that are oriented towards caring for contemporary artworks, and look at how this collaboration is recorded in artwork-related documentation. Chapter 3 looks at museums as collectors of objects and considers how their traditional, object-driven classificatory principles influence their practices related to caring for contemporary works of art. Auxiliary notions such as ‘art project’ and ‘artwork constituency’ support a better understanding of the processes related to the musealisation of contemporary artworks, and make evident how inherent features of the ‘new kind of art’, combined with the current museum procedures, have turned musealisation into a potential threat to the artwork’s integrity. The case study presented in Chapter 3 considers an art project by Danh Vo that resulted in three artefacts, each collected by a large institution. What we find is that in the museum, the identity of the contemporary artwork, distributed between physical objects and the stories which contextualise them, becomes divided between two institutional realms – the collection and the archive – which are governed by different rules and procedures. The case demonstrates that, whereas institutions invest in care for the objects in their collection and do their best to ensure that they remain in optimal conditions, the documentation that often carries the bulk of an artwork’s identity tends to be largely overlooked.

The above observations are confirmed in Chapter 4, which analyses in detail the distribution of a particular contemporary artwork between various domains of the museum, and the consequences this has had for the artwork’s perpetuation. The piece in question, by Barbara Kruger, lacks stable material representation and exists in the museum as a set of digital files. By reflecting on the foundations of the museum as a concept, this chapter proposes that upon musealisation the artwork transforms into stories recorded in documents that represent the artwork. In the digital era, where these stories are stored as records in databases, the quality of this representation follows the logic of accumulation – more stories that interact with each other allow for a more accurate picture of the artwork. The chapter notices, however, that this interaction, does not happen on its own – it needs to be fostered by means of research. The investigation into the above-mentioned theoretical concepts brings into focus complex
interpersonal relationships that govern the institutional collecting of contemporary art and influence the collaboration between artists and institutions. Through critical analysis of the interview conducted with the artist, scrutinised both as a method and as a source, I show how these relationships might impact the implementation of novel methods for the institutional care of contemporary artworks.

Chapter 5 summarises the findings of the empirical part of the study. It confirms the hypothesis that the problem with implementing novel contemporary art conservation methods in art museums is linked to the object-based principles governing museum organisation and guiding collection-care practices, in addition to the complex relationship between artists and art institutions. Building on the concept of ‘artwork-related documentation’ and the notion of anarchives borrowed from Siegfried Zielinski and introduced in Chapter 1, this chapter proposes a solution that might help in solving the identified problems. It features a model of the ‘artwork-as-an-(an)archive’, aimed to help in adapting the existing museum structure to the needs of contemporary art. The model is supported here by examples of institutional practices that have built on a similar argument: that the museum’s traditional division between objects and documents, and in consequence collection and archive, is obsolete in the face of contemporary art. Possible ways of implementing the model in today’s museums are presented through examples of innovative documentation strategies that partially comply with the model’s specifications. Furthermore, the issues of the accessibility of artwork-related documents and the willingness to share them – one of the requirements for the successful implementation of the model – are discussed in relation to the examples from the empirical portion of the study. The final section addresses the artist interview and discusses its possible functions within the proposed model. The understanding of contemporary artworks as archives transforms the artist interview as method into a full-fledged tool for collecting and conserving; seen as a source, it re-emerges as a significant part of the artwork to be collected. What is more, the artist interview is identified as a method for collaboration within the space of the artwork understood as an archive, and thus for negotiating its shape and content. As a research tool it fosters interaction among the archive’s records. Finally, the artist interview as a source might be used as a ‘key’ to the archive – an interpretative tool used to analyse and unravel it.