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.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 07 Nov 2022
Chapter 1

Contemporary Art, the Artist Interview, Documentation and Conservation: Establishment of terms and survey of practices

1.1 Introduction: Foundations of a conceptual framework

Since the early 1990s, the artist interview has gained considerable attention, becoming a significant research and documentation method in the conservation of contemporary art. Its development, far from following a straight trajectory, has been interwoven with advances throughout the field, and has continually changed in relation to current discourses. The last two decades have witnessed efforts towards enriching the method through the improvement of related skills, establishing a theoretical framework to place the interview within the range of conservation tools, as well as examining its value in practice. Most of the literature on the subject approaches the artist interview as an efficient tool that supports decision-making with respect to a particular case study. In other words, authors tend to focus on how the dialogue with the artist helped in resolving a specific conservation problem, whether present or future.

29 The history of the artist interview for conservation purposes is outlined later on in this chapter (see: p. 42).

This book, by contrast, adopts a different approach. By studying the constellation of associations between the artwork, the artist and the institution, it looks at the interview as a tool used in museums, and studies its implementation and functions in the processes related to institutional collecting.

This chapter aims to lay the groundwork for the investigation and analysis of the outcome of this study, by reconsidering the notion of the artist interview together with three related concepts – the ‘contemporary artwork’, its ‘documentation’, and its ‘conservation’ in the museum context. The way the particular concepts and phenomena are presented here is influenced by the research covered in the following chapter, as well as my own experience as a conservator and museum professional. The chapter begins with a reflection on the notion of contemporary art and the identification of defining features of contemporary artworks. These will serve later as a key reference for constructing a theoretical and conceptual framework for this research. The second section focuses on interviews with artists. It starts by contextualising them as a genre in the field of visual art and curatorship, then moving on to the discipline of conservation. The history of the artist interview as a conservation-related research method is presented together with a brief overview of the literature addressing this issue. After introducing debates on the notion of ‘artist intent’, the argument then reflects on the similarities between the theoretical and methodological grounds of the artist interview and oral history theory, and, lastly, concludes with a proposed working definition of the artist interview, intended for further examination during the empirical part of the study. To ground this investigation in the area of collection-related practices, the third section contextualises the artist interview within the institutional ecosystem by presenting it as a part of the artwork’s documentation. The latter is approached from the perspective of recent practices and discourses in visual art, which observes the blurring of the boundary between the artwork and its documentation. The next part touches upon the rising importance of documentation as a conservation tool and the challenges related to documenting contemporary art within the museum setting. It concludes by proposing a conceptual model for the documentation of an artwork within the context of an institutional collection, questioning the hierarchization of the elements in both the archive and collection. The last issue scrutinized is the notion of conservation, which, especially in the context of contemporary art, is currently undergoing significant changes. Because it is important to clarify what this book
understands by ‘conservation’, a working definition of the term is offered, adjusted to the needs of the argument. Out of this analysis, the chapter converges on a pressing research question that will guide the empirical portion of the study, asking what the functions and uses of the artist interview are in relation to the body of documentation produced around institutionally collected artworks.

1.2 Contemporary Art, Contemporary Artwork

Today’s artistic events cannot be preserved and contemplated like traditional artworks. However, they can be documented, ‘covered’, narrated and commented on. Traditional art produced art objects. Contemporary art produces information about art events. (Groys, 2016)

In common parlance, contemporary art is art created during our own lifetime. Following this line of reasoning, and paraphrasing the text from a well-known neon installation by Maurizio Nannucci that once shone over the main entrance to the Altes Museum in Berlin, all art has been contemporary during the time in which it was produced. Nevertheless, this popular designation is a relative one, and is rarely employed today within the framework of art theory and art criticism. Therefore, since this dissertation confronts problems related to the conservation of a particular kind of art, its main subject needs to be clearly defined from the outset. Interestingly, this approach is rare in the field of conservation of contemporary art, and in my view this absence is a weak point of the current theoretical discussions in the field. Consequently, using writings by various scholars as a starting point, this section aims to clarify how the notion of contemporary art will be understood and employed throughout the pages of this book.

---


As conservator and scholar Paolo Martore has aptly noted, in conservation literature the term ‘contemporary art’ is imprecise and “seems to allude to artworks made of heterodox material and techniques confronted to the ‘tradition’, within an incredible wide range of expressive trends” (Martore, 2009, p. 2).
The first, most intuitive, and self-evident definition of the term is linked to the relation between the date of an artwork’s creation and an audience’s position in time, which would mean current, contemporary to ‘us’ or, following the words of philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys, “being immediately present, as being here-and-now” (Groys, 2009). However, in recent discourses ‘contemporary art’ is presented not as a temporal marker but rather a separate phenomenon or distinctive condition within the historical tradition of artistic movements.3 As such, it might be approached in two ways: firstly, from the chronological perspective as an epoch which started at a certain time and continues until now; secondly, as a condition of art, a new paradigm of artistic practice, that can be characterized in a certain way, and which addresses certain issues and has a certain formal shape.

One commonly discussed understanding of the term is related to the periodization in art history; however, even this categorization is not a fixed one and discussions are still ongoing. In most interpretations, ‘contemporary art’ is in a way a succession, direct or indirect, of the ‘Modern’ as a philosophy which dominated art in the 20th century. In this sense, the demands of the contemporary could be understood as opposing the main postulate of Western modernity, namely continual progress. As Groys summarizes, “contemporary art is different from Modern art that was directed toward the future [...]. The contemporary ‘contemporary art’ privileges the present in respect to the future and to the past” (Groys, 2007). Art historian and critic Claire Bishop has pertinently noticed that “until the late 1990s, it [contemporary art] seemed synonymous with ‘post-war’, denoting art after 1945; about ten years ago, it was relocated to start somewhere in the 1960s” (Bishop, 2013, p. 16). Currently, the start of the ‘contemporary art era’ has been pushed forward to the end of the 1980s, the fall of communism, the emergence of digital culture and the rise of neo-liberalism (Alexander Alberro in Foster, 2009, p. 55). Nevertheless, it is not a precise date that marks the beginning of the ‘contemporary’, but rather a set of historical, social and cultural occurrences which have been discussed at length in the literature. For instance, art historian Terry Smith, in his seminal book What is Contemporary Art, points at three sets of forces that shape

3 Following the growing popularity and use of the term it has been critically approached by many thinkers from fields of art history, art theory and philosophy. A significant compilation of texts on this issue is the Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’ edited by Hal Foster and published in the journal October (Foster, 2009).
'contemporaneity' not only as a denomination in the arts, but also as the “attribute of the current world picture”: globalisation, inequity among peoples and the immersion of society into an ‘infoscape’ (T. Smith, 2009, pp. 5–6). In his view, the shift from modern to contemporary originated in the 1950s, emerged on the scene in the 1960s and became evident in the 1980s.

From an institutional perspective, the location of the contemporary as a phenomenon in time is convenient, as it follows art history's traditional, chronological, linear narrative and allows for easy categorisation of which artworks fulfil this category and which do not. Nevertheless, the second understanding of the term ‘contemporary art’, regarding the paradigm shift in artistic practice, is the one favoured in this dissertation. Among other attributes, this shift can be characterised as addressing the dichotomy of artworks’ concept and objecthood, which is pertinent in terms of the direction in which the field of contemporary art conservation has developed in recent decades (see: Introduction, p. 15). Accordingly, this dichotomy has been employed as a lens for selecting writings by art theorists in order to lay the foundations of the theoretical framework developed in this chapter, and to identify references which will serve for further theoretical explorations. The aim of gathering together diverse ideas that reflect the heterogeneity of the concept of ‘contemporary art’ is not to provide an explanation of the term, but rather to present the reader with a set of concepts as a basis for understanding the origins and backdrops of the questions and concerns presented in this dissertation.

The first category is ‘post-conceptual’, as introduced by philosopher Peter Osborne. It is understood not as a designation for a particular type of art, but as a historical-ontological condition. According to Osborne, contemporary art has a post-conceptual character, which can be indicated within the dialectical constellation of the aesthetic as well as conceptual and distributive aspects of art (Osborne, 2010). What this means is that, first of all, Osborne's post-conceptual artwork can no longer be conceived of as a closed, autonomous or self-sufficient entity that remains identical to itself everywhere.

34 For example, this chronological perspective is applied as an organising principle by Centre Pompidou. See: Chapter 3, p. 202.
and at all times (Osborne, 2013). Autonomous art in this context is understood as an ‘art for art’s sake’ and conceived outside of the framework of social dependencies. By contrast, Osbourne’s contemporary artwork can take on different shapes depending on the context (Prinz, 2017, p. 55). It is rather “a radically distributive [...] unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time” (Osborne, 2010). Osborne also opposes the modernist concept of medium-specificity to the idea of ‘contemporary’ as a ‘transmedia’ or ‘post-medium’ condition, in line with the writings of art historian Rosalind Krauss (Krauss, 1999).

Another appealing concept is the one proposed by art historian David Joselit in his controversial book After Art. With reference to the art produced today, he does away with the concept of medium, aiming to expand the definition of art by embracing “heterogeneous configurations of relationships and links” (Joselit, 2012, p. 2). He argues that despite the changes to the development of artistic practices introduced in the 20th century, most “art historical interpretation continues to depart from the presumption that objects are its fundamental units of analysis – even if it’s recognized that since Conceptual Art, artworks have become unconventional and provisional sorts of things” (Joselit, 2012, p. 43). In opposition to such reasoning, Joselit introduces the notion of ‘format’, namely a constellation of links or connections between people, objects, spaces, events and so on. ‘Mediums’ in his theory are subsets of ‘formats’, as he sees the difference mostly in the scale and flexibility of the latter. Still, in his view the ‘medium’ is an obsolete notion characterised as “analogue in a digital world” (Joselit, 2012, p. 52).

The third voice in the discussion is that of Boris Groys. In his seminal essay Topology of Contemporary Art, the Russian-German philosopher argues that the leading form of contemporary art is the installation. Yet, for Groys, an installation can consist of individual paintings, “since the crucial aspect of the painting as an artwork is not the fact that it was produced by an artist but that it was selected by an artist and presented as something selected” (Groys, 2007, para. 11). Contrary to traditional material supports, among which he includes both canvas and film, the medium of installation is the space. Groys also builds his argument on the dichotomy of ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’, pointing out that while the former was oriented towards an individual
form, the latter “is working on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation” (Groys, 2007, para. 11). That is why, in Groys’s opinion, contemporary art is less related to the production of individual objects, and is, rather, a “manifestation of an individual decision to include or to exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world – to give them a new context or to deny it to them: a private selection that is at the same time publicly accessible and thereby made manifest, present, explicit” (Groys, 2007, para. 11).

There are other phenomena present in the discourse surrounding the definition of ‘contemporary art’ that I find important to introduce as referential to the use of the term within this study. Foremost among them is the current rise of process-based practices in art, taken in the broad sense. By process-based I mean both ‘process art’ in which the process of creation is emphasized as equal or even superior to its end product, and time-based art, such as performance, where the process itself is an artwork in its own right.\textsuperscript{35} I would argue that, considering the increased importance of how the artwork has been made and all activities related to the creative act, contemporary artworks are potentially process-based to some extent.\textsuperscript{36} The second tendency, which is directly interlinked with the previous one, is art that understands itself as research, where research is considered a part of the artistic process and is carried out by the artist him or herself (Busch, 2009). In this context, the character of the research borrows from academics, and might be carried out using historical, sociological or ethnographical methods. For this type of art, research is not a preliminary phase but rather constitutes the work itself.\textsuperscript{37} However, these two conditions do not exclude the possibility that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} There are several tendencies in fine art practice that fit into this definition, e.g. relational art as coined in 1998 by Nicolas Bourriaud, see: Bourriaud, N. (2010). Relational aesthetics. Dijon: Les Presses du réel; or occupational realism as defined by Julia Bryan-Wilson, see: Bryan-Wilson, J. (2012). Occupational Realism. The Drama Review, (Winter 2012), pp. 32–48.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Process-based is a denomination of artistic strategies acknowledged as important since at least the time of Fluxus. As noticed by Andreas Broeckmann, an art historian specialized in media art and digital culture, one can speak about process-orientation in artistic practices in cases where the evolving process itself is a main factor of the aesthetic experience of the artwork (Broeckmann, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{37} This drive in contemporary art has been described by Hal Foster in his seminal article Artist as ethnographer? See: Foster, H. (1995). The Artist as Ethnographer? In G. E. Marcus & F. R. Myers (Eds.), The traffic in culture. Refiguring art and anthropology (pp. 302–309). Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
\end{itemize}
processes, such as research, can be presented by conventional means of visual art, such as video or photographic documentation or even an art object like a painting or sculpture. The approach to the notion of ‘contemporary art’ beyond the chronological category within the history of visual art exists also outside of the fields of art history and art criticism. In line with these observations, sociologist Nathalie Heinich proposes that contemporary art should be considered as a new paradigm of artistic practice, an aesthetic category within the arts. Within this framework she offers a contention that “the artwork is no longer exclusively the actual object proposed by the artist, but rather the whole set of operations, actions, interpretations, etc., brought about by this proposition” (Heinich, 2014, p. 35).

To summarize, the way the term ‘contemporary art’ will be used in this study is less related to a particular moment in time or an art-historical period, but rather to art which may comply with certain features that can be defined as four framing aspects: conceptuality (in terms of the balance between concepts and their outcomes, which may or may not be object-based), contextuality (in terms of social/historical/cultural dependencies), media-variability (as opposed to media-specificity) and processuality (a rise in the importance of processes for results, as well as durability in time). It does not mean that these aspects are equally significant in all contemporary artworks, but that all contemporary artworks might encompass each of these aspects to a certain degree and, while being investigated as collectibles, they should be examined against all of them. This bundle of traits shares a common denominator in the artwork’s potentiality for change. In this dissertation, this aspect will be covered by the term ‘changeability’, as introduced by conservation theorist Hanna Hölling. In her writings, Hölling juxtaposes this notion with ‘variability’ as established by the Variable Media Initiative (Depocas, Ippolito, & Jones, 2003), which presumes a variation within fixed, predefined parameters and implies reliance upon a mean value (Hölling, 2013, 2015). Changeability, on the other hand, may surpass any fixed parameters. In practical terms this means that an artwork can exist in various forms, even beyond those that were

---

38 Similar categories have been identified by Miriam La Rosa in her research addressing contradictions in the terms employed by contemporary art museums regarding collecting. La Rosa points to the three-dimensional identity of contemporary artwork, which is contextual, processual and conceptual. See: La Rosa, 2013.
assigned during the initial phase of the creative process. For Hölling this changeability can be driven by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors and is contingent on time and context.39

To apply this discourse within the framework of a museum, one additional remark is required. Following the lead of earlier discourses, this dissertation will distinguish between ‘artworks’ and ‘art objects’. Both terms commonly circulate in the fields to which this study relates – art history and conservation – and are often used interchangeably. Nevertheless, as this study argues, in the case of contemporary art the substance and identity of the artwork lies beyond its physical embodiment, which, in the context of a museum collection, we will be calling an ‘art object’. This distinction will prove convenient later on for our analysis of museum practices, as it allows us to separate between conservation’s approach to the work as an ‘artwork’ and as an ‘object’.40

1.3 Interviewing the Artist and the Artist Interview

1.3.1 Interviews with Artists as a Genre

What the manifesto was to modern art, the interview is to contemporary art: the principal vehicle of public relations and vital theoretical supplement to artistic practice. (D. Miller, 2009, p. 7)

In the course of the 20th century, artists’ utterances have become pervasive within the world of visual art. Nearly every exhibition catalogue contains an interview with or a statement by an artist. Nearly every exhibition is accompanied by interviews published in cultural sections of magazines with the aim to promote the event and

39 The growing acknowledgment of change as one of the artwork’s features is not only specific to the conservation of modern and contemporary art. For instance, changing perceptions of time is one of the criteria in Ernst van Wetering’s decision making model. See: Ernst van de Wetering (1978). Not published. Related source: van Wetering, 1979.

40 A similar consideration was presented by philosopher and conservation theorist Renée van de Vall while addressing the issue of change: “we need to distinguish between changes which have an impact on the work as an artwork, and thereby on the range of appropriate interpretations, and changes which only affect the work as an object, leaving its possible interpretations unchanged” (van de Vall, 2015b, p. 296).
encourage attendance. Live conversations with renowned artists (and by renowned curators) organized by museums and universities attract large audiences.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, interviews with artists occupy a key place in the interpretation and understanding of the creative act and are an important source of reference for critics and art historians.

This dissertation approaches the museum both as an ecosystem and as the institutional reflection of the diversity of the art world, and therefore considers conservation-related issues as an inherent part of general discourses in art and vice-versa.\textsuperscript{42} Following this line of reasoning, before discussing the peculiarities of the interview understood as an established research tool in conservation, this section presents how the method unfolded in the more general framework of the art world. Building on the writings of art historians, curators and art critics, it offers a contextualisation of the conservation-related artist interview within the broader genre. Furthermore, it points to issues that are overlooked in the conservation-related literature, mainly the artists’ perspective on the possibilities that interviews offer and the creative potential that the method presents for all participants involved.

Relying on the writings of philosopher Arnold Gehlen, Swiss art historian Christoph Lichtin traces the popularity of interviewing in visual art back to the first decades of the 20th century (Lichtin, 2016). In his view, the need for artists’ comments was elicited

\textsuperscript{41} A key example is the popularity of books and events by Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator, critic and art historian. Obrist is author of the ongoing, expansive Interview Project, in which he carries out conversations with major cultural figures. Twenty-eight of the interviews, with artists such as Jeff Koons, Wolfgang Tillmans, John Baldessari and Christian Boltanski, have been published so far in the book series entitled \textit{The Conversation Series}, published by Walther König, Cologne. In 2006 at the Serpentine Gallery Obrist organized the 24-hour Interview Marathon, which included, in addition to artists such as Gilbert and George, Richard Hamilton and Damien Hirst, writers, scientists and historians. See: Simonini, 2013.

\textsuperscript{42} The notion of the ‘art world’ was introduced by Arthur Danto in 1964, as an answer to the changes in aesthetic production in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Danto “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world” (Danto, 1964). The art world is a realm in which artists, museums, collectors and others create and discuss developments in art as well as a context in which a work can be seen as an artwork (van Maanen, 2009). A comparative study of approaches to the art world as practiced by philosophers, art theorists and sociologists such as Dickie, Becker, Bourdieu, Heinich, and Luhmann is provided by van Maanen (2009). Interestingly, while the idea that conservation is a part of the art world seems to be indisputable, many conservators approach this notion in the same terms as the art market, and intuitively locate themselves along its margins.
by a gap between art and its audience related to the abandonment of representation in visual arts.\textsuperscript{43} The emergence of the interview is, according to Lichtin, a direct consequence of the advent of artists’ statements contextualising their work, such as art manifestos, and the need to embed the artistic creation within a theoretical framework. Lichtin locates the beginnings of the institutionalisation of interviews with artists in the 1920s, when journals such as *De Stijl* or *L’espirit nouveau* dedicated entire columns to the genre. From the outset, the subject of these interviews varied from a broad focus on an artist’s life and convictions to the story of one particular artwork. Exploring the correlation between an artist and his or her creation in terms of purpose, intention and context was always the main interest behind the interview.

Art critic Daniel Miller (2009) positions the shift in the significance of the interview in the 20th-century art world nearer to the present than Lichtin, and links it directly to the rise of reciprocal interest between visual art and philosophy dating back to the 1960s. According to Miller, since that time, what is said about the work of art is as significant as the work of art itself, and in the contemporary, highly intellectual art environment “there is no way that the interview can be distinguished from art” (D. Miller, 2009, p. 9). He also points at another function of the medium, discussing the interview as a principal vehicle for public relations, namely networking. This idea is presented in Miller’s writings as follows:

> The heart of the interview is contained in the stances and protocols, complicities, postures and passwords which artists accrue in the practice of opening channels, and keeping them open. In fact, the interview serves both as a clinic in which abiding patterns are seen to and as a laboratory in which new connections are forged. (D. Miller, 2009, p. 8)

Yet, in the context of the art world the interview may be a tool for networking and building status and reputation not only for interviewees, but also for interviewers. In *An anatomy of the interview* Iwona Blazwick, a curator with extensive experience

\textsuperscript{43} A similar opinion can be found in the writings of art historian Robert Goldwater. In the second edition of his prominent anthology *Artists on Art* published in 1974, Goldwater attributed the increasing enthusiasm among artists to ‘use’ the interview to the desire to bridge what he described as the widening ‘gap’ between themselves and the public (Bickers, 2007).
as an interviewer, discusses the relationship of authority between both parties involved in the conversation (Blazwick, 2007). Blazwick offers a brief overview of different strategies that interviewers employ within the genre, starting with that of ‘interrogator’ and ‘prosecutor’. The first consists of asking questions strictly following a script and without entering into a dialogue, whereas the second, adopted mostly by journalists, involves continuous attempts to challenge the respondent. According to Blazwick, most critics, historians and curators usually adopt a different position – that of biographer, researcher and, most importantly, collaborator. This approach is not only more efficient and results in more interesting outcomes, but is also potentially beneficial for the interviewer. The special trust granted by the celebrated artist shifts the status of the interviewer to that of a ‘privileged’ person. Simply put, he or she might be written into art history along with the interviewed artist (Blazwick, 2007, p. 26).

Yet, besides acting as a stage for artists to express and explain their ideas and a tool for social relations, the interview also provides space for them to implement or continue the artistic strategies used in their work. On the one hand, the medium is a place for developing a persona – a constructed alter ego of the artist, a public image intertwined with the artistic creation or even an integral part of it. The classic example of this strategy is Andy Warhol, who consciously shaped his public image as a ‘pop-artist’ in numerous interviews given to the media. He often took on the role of the “dumb teenager” who had apparently “fallen for the goofiness of pop culture”, stating that he painted soup cans because he thought they looked nice, or when asked about his use of images from race riots, explained that they had simply “caught his eye” (Lichtin, 2016, p. 119). On the other hand, artists often employ interviews as an artistic medium. In Between the Frames (1983-1992), a seminal project by Antoni Muntadas, the artist

---

44 A representative example is journalist and art critic Calvin Tomkins, whose impressive career was launched by a series of interviews with Marcel Duchamp.

45 There are numerous examples of the ‘creative’ employment of the ‘interview with artist’ as a genre, and among the renowned characters from the art world who mastered this strategy we find, among others, Marcel Duchamp (Lichtin, 2016). An interesting instance, worth mentioning in this frame of reference, is the story of Sigmar Polke fabricating an interview with Gerhard Richter. The fictitious Richter from the interview claimed that his works had served as instruments of torture in concentration camps and that his paintings had killed Stalin. The idea behind the project was a reflection on the issues related to art and power that accompanied German artists in the post-World War II context (Hindahl, 2015).
interviewed art dealers, collectors, critics, academics and museum professionals to portray the 1980s art world and reveal the structures that regulate the way in which art is made, marketed, and communicated to the public. The work consists of video-recorded interviews organized in thematic ‘chapters’ which are presented and collected as separate artworks. The final outcome of the long-term project is a large multi-media installation entitled Between the Frames: The Forum, for which the artist designed an architectural structure that produces a physical ‘forum’, a space designated for discussion in which the voices of the interviewees are woven together. Since transcripts of the interviews were published in a book, they also might be used as a documentary source.

These diverse facets of the interview – a platform for the creation of an artistic ‘self’, a networking tool, or an artistic medium in its own right – intertwine, overlap and intersect within the framework of the art world. One example of this multifaceted character is the work of American artist Doug Aitken, who for more than a decade has been involved in conversations with other artists representing many different areas, from visual art to music. Some of his recent conversations have been published online on a platform called The Source, which provides access to 23 video-recorded interviews with other artists. These conversations are shot as autonomous video pieces (Aitken, n.d.). The platform is a publicly accessible artwork in its own right, and at the same time a presentation of Aitken’s artistic research and a source of other artists’ stories.


Finally, the interview with the artist is a research tool that offers the possibility of grasping a notion of the artist’s way of envisaging reality, thereby providing insight into the nature of the work of art. Interestingly, Blazwick’s accurate, although personal, explanation of what this tool actually offers does not centre on collecting facts, but rather on understanding, relating and contextualising. Descriptions of method and technique ground the work in process. Formal strategies may be situated within an ideological framework, or understood within the context of a zeitgeist that expands out from the subjective, lived experience of the artist within a cultural and socio-political context. We establish, perhaps unconsciously, an empathetic relationship with the art object as its autonomy is inflected with a psychology, a voice (Blazwick, 2007, p. 27). Blazwick acknowledges that the interview, despite promising veracity by providing access to the primary source and the delusion of the ‘true confession’, it is in fact a “beautiful construct” – a self-conscious performance by the participants, edited and reconstructed for a third party, namely the audience (Blazwick, 2007, p. 27).

Within the milieu of visual art, interviews with artists represent a multidimensional genre of its own. Since conservation of contemporary art is performed within the same context, be it inside or outside of the museum framework, and accordingly influenced by characteristics and dynamics of the art world, the conservation-oriented artist interview might be seen as a variation on this genre. In consequence, all issues discussed in this section – the interview as a continuation of or complement to the artist’s practice, its creative potential, its role as a status builder and a tool for forging social connections, and its features as a research tool – are equally pertinent for the method investigated in this dissertation. As such, the question that arises from this assumption is what differentiates ‘an interview with an artist’ from ‘the artist interview’, and whether this distinction is even necessary. To address this issue, we must first introduce the history and development of conservation-related artist interviews.

1.3.2 Interviewing Artists for Conservation Purposes: A brief history

Direct communication between artists and the keepers of their work focused on preservation-related issues is a relatively recent phenomenon – the term ‘artist interview’, which is nowadays widely used in the field, was only coined around two
decades ago. However, as made explicit in numerous related writings, an exchange of information between these two parties began to take place in the early 20th century, principally in written form (Cangia, 2013; Chiantore & Rava, 2013; Hummelen & Scholte, 2012; Weyer & Heydenreich, 2005). This need was driven by the rise in the employment of non-traditional materials in art production, related both to the new artistic practices that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as the development of the art-supply industry. The keepers were interested in gathering data regarding the techniques and methods used by artists in their work – factual information necessary to develop suitable conservation strategies.

According to the literature on the subject, one of the first initiatives to collect information from living artists for conservation-related purposes was undertaken by German art historian Franz Büttner Pfänner zu Thal, who employed a written questionnaire (Weyer & Heydenreich, 2005). Another historical example of a similar endeavour took place in the first half of 20th century in the Netherlands. In 1939, the Committee of Paintings of the Community of Amsterdam sent a letter to living artists who had sold their paintings to the Stedelijk Museum, asking them for their opinion on future conservation treatment. The letter, in the form of a questionnaire, included queries about the use of materials and relating to specific subjects like the possible removal of varnish, or approaches to conservation treatments such as lining (Hummelen & Scholte, 2012).

Due to the acceleration of the evolution of artistic practices after WWII, the second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of further research projects involving communication between conservators and artists. For instance, between 1978 and

---

48 As I will explain further on, the term ‘artist interview’ was coined around the turn of the 20th century (see: p. 45).

49 The use of manufactured art materials, which proliferated in the second half of the 19th century, was to have major consequences for the field of conservation. Manufacturers began modifying the traditional recipes and experimenting with components, and this influenced the stability of the paints, grounds, canvases, etc.

50 This example, widely cited in the literature, is located by Weyer & Heydenreich (2005, p. 385-388) at the beginning of the 20th century, but without providing an exact date. According to the authors, the project of Büttner Pfänner zu Thal was referenced in the 1903 book *Über die Mal-Technik by Adolf Keim* (Adolf Wilhelm Keim, *Über Mal-Technik*, Leipzig 1903, pp. 97-98).
1981, Heinz Althöfer and Hiltrud Schinzel from the Restaurierungszentrum in Düsseldorf invited selected artists represented in the collection of the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum to participate in a survey whose aim was to gather information for conservation purposes. Questions were designed individually for each case study, and despite the standard issues like the specification of materials, they also alluded to problems of possible replacements and potential collaboration in the conservation process (Weyer & Heydenreich, 2005). Moreover, Althöfer and Schinzel’s research project contained new documentation strategies, like a video recording showing the artist at work (Chiantore & Rava, 2013). In 1979, German conservator Erich Ganzert-Castrillo published his Archive for Techniques and Materials of Contemporary Artists, which compiles data from questionnaires on artistic practice completed by hundreds of artists from German-speaking countries. Remarkably, according to the author the publication attracted the attention of many artists, collectors, art teachers and art historians, while interest among conservators was rather limited (Ganzert-Castrillo, 2005, pp. 284–289). Another study of artists’ opinions about and possible participation in conservation was conducted in the mid-1980s by Swiss conservators Wilhelm Stebler and Emil Bossard. According to Weyer & Heydenreich, the investigation set out from the assumption that an artist has a certain right to interfere in the conservation decision-making process. Interestingly, in an article that summarized the results of the project, Stebler warned against the overvaluation of an artist’s opinion in relation to particular conservation tasks, while at the same time acknowledging its value as a point of departure for defining ‘the concept’ behind the artwork (Weyer & Heydenreich, 2005). As a result of the method employed in all the aforementioned examples – namely a written questionnaire – communication between the involved parties was essentially unidirectional. This approach changed at the beginning of the 1990s with the Artists Documentation Program (ADP), the pioneering initiative of Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then chief conservator at the Menil Collection in Houston. Initially, the goal


of the project was to inform the caretakers at the Menil about artists’ views on the conservation of their work and to provide information about materials and techniques. However, the primary objective of fact-finding shifted to a much broader documentary focus, mostly due to the innovative approach of Mancusi-Ungaro. She decided to use as her method the video-recorded interview, conducted in the presence of artworks that elicit the interviewees’ memories. Structured as a conversation between an artist and a conservator, its intent was to grant artists the freedom to discuss their concerns about the artwork’s future. As ADP was an initiative of a collecting institution, interviews were focused on a particular artwork (or group of artworks) from their holdings. Still, these conversations mainly addressed the materiality of the works, and consisted of straightforward fact-oriented questions. Artists’ thoughts, interests and intentions were meant to lead to an understanding of the meaning of the materials and the way they were used in the artwork (Mancusi-Ungaro, 2005).

The ADP was an inspiration for two subsequent projects: *Artists’ Interviews* and *Artists’ Interviews / Artists’ Archives*, carried out in the Netherlands in 1998-1999 (Hummelen, Menke, Petovic, Sillé, & Scholte, 1999) and 2001-2004 (Hummelen, 2005), respectively, in a collaboration between the former Institute for Cultural Heritage

---

53. This is clearly observable in the interview conducted by Mancusi-Ungaro with Lawrence Weiner, one of the central figures of American conceptual art and one of the first to conceive the work of art in opposition to a static object. The conservator starts the conversation by introducing herself and the objective of the conversation: “I am a conservator, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. I am interested in preserving things – physical stuff.” Weiner responds with hesitation: “I am perplexed, because the nature of the work is that it’s a specific object without a specific form” (Weiner, L. (2008, January 16). Lawrence Weiner Interview Transcript [Interview by C. Mancusi-Ungaro]. Retrieved from http://adp.menil.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ adp2008b_weiner_transcript.pdf. The interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

54. In 2011, a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation allowed for the organization of the collected data and to make information available to the public through an online database (Cooke, 2011). Currently, the archive website lists the names of 39 artists who have been interviewed either directly, or via an interview with an assistant or spouse, or even Menil Founding Director Walter Hopps, who discusses the work of Edward Kienholz. Some entries, for instance in the case of Mel Chin, consist of two interviews – the first conducted in 1991 and a follow-up in 2014. See: Artists Documentation Program. Retrieved from http://adp.menil.org/
(ICN) and the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK). Twenty artists active in the Netherlands, both Dutch and foreign, were interviewed about their working methods and choice of materials in the context of the whole body of their work. The purpose was twofold: assembling essential data for preservation and collection management, as well as developing guidelines for conservation-oriented artist interviews (Beerkens et al., 2012). Following Mancusi-Ungaro’s approach, all interviews were filmed. This method was chosen to allow for the creation of original sources that might retain their unique value over time (Beerkens et al., 2012). The first part of the project culminated with the development of an original model for structuring an interview with an artist for conservation purposes, titled Concept Scenario: Artists’ Interviews (1999), which refers to interviews understood mainly as oral communication. Despite the fact that this guideline does not offer a precise definition of what the artist interview really is, it was essentially at that moment that the method received its proper name.

The challenge related to the accessibility of the information collected from the artist was also addressed at this time. In 1999 the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) was established, a platform designed to collect, share and preserve knowledge for the conservation of contemporary art. The idea behind the initiative was twofold: to further develop guidelines for interviewing artists, and to build a website to facilitate the exchange of professional information and knowledge about contemporary art conservation. In the first year after its founding, INCCA members, both conservators and curators, conducted around fifty interviews with artists. This experience helped to develop the INCCA Guide to Good Practice: Artists’ Interviews (2002), which expanded the idea of an interview to nine different types of communication, including letters, questionnaires and phone calls.

55 Since 2011 the activities of the ICN have been accommodated within the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE).

56 INCCA, founded by a group of twenty-three individuals from eleven European institutions and organizations, is hosted within the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Wharton, 2009). The initiative originated in the previously mentioned Dutch project Artists’ Interviews, and its first coordinator was Tatja Scholte, one of the PhD candidates within the project New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (see: p. 20).

The two Dutch projects described above resulted in a third publication, which to this day is the most complete set of guidelines for interviewing artists, titled *The Artist Interview For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art: Guidelines and Practice* (Beerkens et al., 2012). The artist interview is defined here as a research method meant to illuminate artists’ intent in relation to their work process, choice of materials and techniques. The aim of the interview is to collect information that helps understand how materials, appearance, function and presentation affect the meanings of an artwork, and finally how these meanings can be altered by the factor of change (Beerkens et al., 2012, p. 15). The volume understands the interview merely as oral communication, specifying four versions of the method. Central to the book’s conception is the most extensive type, the “oeuvre interview”, which has been tested in the empirical portion of both of the aforementioned projects. However, the introduction to the categorization acknowledges the fact that in everyday museum practice the “oeuvre” type of interview might not be feasible or effective, and therefore goes on to specify other categories, namely: an interview based on a specific set of artworks (theme interview), a group of artworks from the collection (collection interview) or a specific artwork (case interview). With regard to possible scenarios, the authors allude to the classification used in social sciences and suggest the semi-structured interview as the most efficient method (Beerkens et al., 2012). The book is designed in two parts, where the theoretical hypotheses of the first part are tested in the second by critically reflecting on the resulting interviews in relation to their purpose.

Besides practice-led projects, initiatives, and resulting publications, the artist interview as a research method for the conservation of modern and contemporary art has likewise been addressed in theoretical terms by various scholars, and has been the subject of academic investigation. A significant research project in this area, which this book will refer to at length later on, is that of Vivian van Saaze, in which she tackles the co-constructed character of the interview as a source and points out the diverse interests of the parties involved as a factor that may influence the course of the encounter (van Saaze, 2009c). However, it is important to mention that the field of conservation theory is often fed by practice. Many academics are actually trained

---

58 Controversies centred around the possibility of documenting artist intent will be presented in the latter part of this subchapter.
as conservators and therefore ground their writings in empirical experience. This is the case of Sanneke Stigter, who argues that artists’ ideas about the perpetuation of their older work are often influenced by challenges they face in their current practice, which must be taken into account when using the interview as a basis for designing conservation strategies (Stigter, 2004, 2009). In recent years the artist interview for conservation purposes has been at the core of several doctoral dissertations, such as that of Ruth del Fresno-Guillem, in which the author explores the potential of the method of preventive conservation (Fresno-Guillem, 2017).

During the last hundred years, the communication between artists and those in charge of caring for their artworks has evolved from the written, one-way transmission of information to an oral method for gathering not only facts but also the relationships between them. This process has been supported by the development of a structured methodology and theoretical framework. The shift from simply ‘downloading information’ to focusing on how this information is constructed and what it adds to the understanding of the artwork in question bears similarity to the interview as conceptualised in oral history theory, and this resemblance will be explored in detail in the following sections of this chapter.
1.3.3 The Artist’s Intent and the Artist Interview

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane. The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of. Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal “art coefficient” contained in the work. (Duchamp, 1957)

The artist interview is often defined as a tool allowing for comprehension of the artist’s intent. As already mentioned in the introduction to this book (see: p. 9), although artist intent is one of the key notions of conservation, conservators employ it rather broadly, encompassing everything from the ideas that guided the creation of an artwork to opinions that artists express years later in response to a conservation problem (Wharton, 2015a). According to conservation scholar Paolo Martore, in conservation the term is often used as a “shortcut to solve artwork’s identity issue, as well as to establish a single undisputed meaning” (Martore, 2009, p. 2). However, as with so many art-related concepts, the artist’s intent is not a rigid notion describing the fixed state of mind of a creator, but rather a concept in permanent flux – a complex, often open-ended process of defining the identity and meanings of an artwork. This brings up the question of whether pursuing this ambiguous, contested term is in fact a suitable objective for the artist interview.

---

59 “Artist interviews are conducted to gain in-depth understanding of the artist’s intent in relation to his working method and choice of materials, production techniques or preferred media.” (Beerkens et al., 2012, p. 15)

60 It is important to mention that this is not always the case. Already in 1996, art historian Ernst van Wetering advocated directly for conservation decision making to have a degree of autonomy from the artist’s intentions (van Wetering, 1996).

The traditionally assumed unequivocalness of artistic intent has been undermined by, among others, Duchamp, who in his famous lecture *The Creative Act* called attention to the gap between intention and realisation (Duchamp, 1957). According to Duchamp, this discrepancy, inherent in any artistic endeavour, prevents art from being exhausted in the moment of its emergence, conferring on it the potential to evolve through interpretation (Wright, 2013). In other words, Duchamp points to the difference between what an artist wants to say through his or her art, which might be partially lost in the process, and what the artwork communicates in spite of the artist’s intentions. In consequence, the artist’s intent is neither easy to identify nor to record, and following the line of thought of conservation theorist Glenn Wharton, its study should be based on the complex relationships between ideas in artists’ minds, diverse influences on their work, and the actual art that they create (Wharton, 2015a).

The ambiguous nature of the concept has led to numerous debates on the validity of artist intent as a reference point for an artwork’s interpretation, starting with the influential article by Wimsatt and Beardsley published in 1946, where both scholars argue against it. *The Intentional Fallacy* advocates that in literature, the intention of the author is irrelevant to the understanding of the work, and the text itself should be seen as the primary source of meanings (Beardsley & Wimsatt Jr., 1946). However, this approach cannot be translated directly onto the case of contemporary visual artworks because, as argued in the previous sections of this chapter, an artwork is a multidimensional, complex entity. Its interpretation is highly dependent on the circumstances in which it was created, and artists’ choices constitute an important path to follow in the reading process. Therefore, artists’ intentions, whether or not they succeed, and although they are difficult to grasp, are not to be ignored. A similar stance is that presented in a seminal article by conservator Steven Dykstra, in which he stresses the importance of the artist’s intentions for the method of interpreting the role of the material in relation to conservation decision-making. Dykstra, however, advocates for the abandonment of artist intent as a technologically defined, scientificaly doctrinaire idea (Dykstra, 1996), and presents its identification as an interdisciplinary challenge requiring contributions from art historians, critics, philosophers, scientist and conservators.62

62 Various scholars related to the field of conservation of modern and contemporary art have further discussed Dykstra’s article in their writings, see e.g.: Hölling, 2017; Scott, 2015; Stigter, 2016; Van Saaze, 2009c; Wharton, 2015a.
An additional level of complexity was added to the notion by Vivian van Saaze, who on the basis of investigating museums’ documentation practices demonstrated that the artist’s intent is not simply derived from the artist or the artwork, but often ‘produced’ together with an institution during the installation process (van Saaze, 2013b). In consequence, van Saaze suggests eschewing the concept of the artist’s intention as a reference in conservation decision-making, and, instead of assuming a one-way knowledge transfer from artists to museums, to explore forms of ‘interaction’ in museum practices leading to the production of knowledge that needs to be documented. The shift of focus from comprehending an artist’s intent to recording interactions opens up the spectrum of an artwork’s documentation to embrace all types of communications produced with the artist or about the artwork in the museum framework.

Umberto Eco, in his seminal book *Open Work* (1989), proposed that contemporary artists purposely leave the interpretation of their work partly open for audiences to complete the creative act. He identifies three different intentions that might guide this interpretation: the intention of the artist, that of the reader (public) and that of the work itself. Taking his approach as a point of departure, and drawing on the discourses presented above, this study builds on the premise that artist intent is to be considered in the interpretative process, and in consequence in conservation and documentation efforts, but cannot be seen as its determining factor.

To summarize, despite the fact that the notion of artist intent as such is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it was necessary to briefly explore the concept early on, as it is commonly employed as one of the guiding purposes of the artist interview.⁶³ On the basis of the literature presented in this section, I propose that the purpose of the artist interview should not be so much to ascertain artist intent, as to collect artists’ accounts of the complex relationships that have shaped their artworks over the course of their career. Further implications of this idea will be explored in detail later on in the conclusions of this subchapter.

---

⁶³ Artist intent in contemporary art is the subject of research carried out by Nina Quabeck at the University of Glasgow within the framework of the New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA) research and training network, see: Quabeck, 2019.
1.3.4 The Artist Interview and Oral History: Discrepancies and commonalities

In various texts about the conservation-related artist interview, it is presented as a method akin to oral history, although in none of the writings has this affinity been explored extensively. In this section, I explore relationships between oral history theory and methodology and the artist interview, by testing selected concepts related to interviewing against oral history principles and theories. This analysis is based on the assumption that it would be beneficial for both the conceptual and practical dimensions of the artist interview as a part of museum practice to embrace certain concepts and methodologies borrowed from this much older and experienced field.

What is an oral history interview then, and why it is different than the interview format employed as a qualitative research method in fields such as social sciences or ethnography? In short, the oral history interview is a specific type of interview covering a subject of historical interest, conducted by an interviewer who understands the subject with a knowledgeable interviewee. Oral history aims to help filling gaps and discontinuities in historical records by preserving and exposing viewpoints and experiences of individuals, groups and communities who may be underrepresented in published historical research (Wynne, 2009), and by doing so to disrupt established historical paradigms (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012). Oral history interview relies on the memory of an individual and the spoken word, offering the interviewee a space to produce a personal narrative. In contrast to other types of interview, the oral history format does not just provide a means of accessing data, but simultaneously charts these data’s significance and interpretative potential, as well as their attached meanings. In other words, oral history pays attention to particular people in order to understand them as subjects in the socio-historical context of the immediate past or the present.

64 The link between oral history and the artist interview has been brought up, for instance, in the aforementioned book The Artist interview, which states that “the interview scenario, as presented further in this book, shows a strong affinity with oral history” (Beerkens et al., 2012, p. 15). See also: Saaze, 2009, p.23. Oral history sources are also a reference in the research and practice of Sanneke Stigter, see: Stigter, 2015, 2016, pp. 92–93.
The guiding principle for a reflection on the intersections between the purpose of the oral history interview and the artist interview might, paradoxically, be the consideration of the apparent discrepancies that emerge in the interviewee’s stated intentions. While oral history is interested not only in collecting information but also in gathering and analysing memory narratives, traditionally the artist interview’s main goal is the gathering of thoughts, facts and opinions that will inform future decisions. However, if the latter were the only purpose of the interaction with an artist, practitioners from the field would not expand it beyond the plain questionnaire. The artist interview also looks at why and how certain decisions were made, the motivation behind these decisions and the circumstances in which they were taken. In fact, the scope of the artist interview’s interest can be nicely summed up with the famous quote by Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, who once said that “oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did” (Portelli, 1989). Therefore, we can assume that the aims of the oral history interview and the artist interview are comparable since, besides collecting factual information, both allow for an analysis of how this information was created, and how it is remembered, comprehended and told during the encounter between researcher and respondent.

Similarly to the communication between artists and the keepers of their artworks, oral history as a discipline has experienced a shift from information gathering to understanding the relations between facts and the context of their production. As part of this shift, oral historians have embraced issues surrounding subjectivity (Adler & Leydesdorff, 2013).65 The latter is an intrinsic part of the interview as a tool for knowledge production, and ought to be recognised as such from the outset. The issue of subjectivity has also been tackled in various texts on the artist interview, both as being produced from a respondent’s particular standpoint affected by personal experience, and as a co-constructed endeavour in which the approach of the interviewer highly

65 In his 2018 article Portelli called this shift a “Copernican revolution”. He claims that “From the original perception that for the sake of authenticity and factual reliability oral sources ought to be cleansed of the presence of the interviewer and of the subjectivity of the interviewee, we moved on to the realization that the real, deep meaning of the encounter lies precisely in these apparent impurities, in the staging of a relationship between differences—between different persons, cultures, classes, and times, and between different layers of the narrating and narrated self” (Portelli, 2018, p. 9).
influences the final product.\textsuperscript{66} Nowadays, subjectivity is acknowledged as an advantage of the oral history method, and is becoming more and more valued as well in conservation-related research.\textsuperscript{67}

Subjectivity as a factor requires that the researcher, as well as the reader, be aware of the fact that the respondent is not only constructing a subjective version of the past in a dialogue with the interviewer, but also drawing upon discourses from the wider culture (Abrams, 2010). This mechanism is also applicable to the interviewer – how she or he designs the interview and the choice of his or her areas of interest. In consequence, memory stories are shaped by these intersubjective relationships brought to the interview. The source constructed in the process of the interview is the result of a three-way dialogue: between the respondent and him or herself, between the interviewer and the respondent, and between the respondent and past and present cultural discourses (Abrams, 2010). This means that the intersubjectivity is three-dimensional, and the third dimension is context-related. For the artist interview, this dimension involves both the context of the creation process and that of the time when the interview is conducted. The challenge for the researcher is to analyse and decode these interrelations, bearing in mind that each one influences the other. It is a difficult process that requires defining each of the factors informing the interview. In the case of the artist interview this influence of ‘discourses from the wider culture’ is the contextual information that informs the artist’s practice; it can be his or her own life story, the socio-political circumstances in which the artwork(s) were created, current debates in the field of art and much more. In her \textit{Theory of Oral History}, historian Lynn Abrams divides this third dimension in terms of two concepts – the idea of the cultural circuit and the concept of composure (Abrams, 2010). The ‘cultural circuit’ refers to processes that cause individual and collective memories to inform one another. In the artist interview, for example, an artist might espouse as part of his or her own story critiques or interpretations that first appeared in articles or catalogues. ‘Composure’ refers to the interviewee’s adoption of a version of the self as adapted to

\textsuperscript{66} See e.g.: Stigter, 2009.

\textsuperscript{67} See e.g.: Beerkens et al., 2012; Cotte, Tse, & Inglis, 2017; Gordon & Hermens, 2013; Stigter, 2012, 2016.
social circumstances, or, more specifically, to the circumstances of the interview. An example of a conscious conversion of this process into an artistic strategy would be the aforementioned creation of the ‘artist persona’.  

Nevertheless, it is possible to channel certain aspects of subjectivity by applying particular approaches. What Alessandro Portelli called the “positivistic tradition” in oral history seeks to minimise interviewers’ interference in the course of the interviews they conduct, and requires them to render themselves ‘invisible’. Conservation theory and practice also have their ‘positivistic strand’ that influences the development of the concept and practical application of the artist interview. This approach calls for a ‘minimal intervention’ in the creation of the source that will be used in future decision-making. Interestingly, at some point this approach was called into question in both oral history and in conservation, and in both cases the keywords employed in this process were ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’. Hammer and Wildavsky emphasise the difference between conversation and interview by pointing out three qualities (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993). Firstly, the interview is based on well-planned and well-thought-out questions and answers. Secondly, the interviewee is the most important element in this communicative act. Thirdly, the interviewer is not supposed to reveal his or her views, nor to agree or disagree, which could guide the respondent. Yet, in the case of interviewing artists, following this regime does not necessarily benefit the objective of the task. In 2009, Glenn Wharton used the term “guided conversation” to describe a methodological approach to interviewing artists in which the interviewer takes on the role of guide (McCoy, 2009). The term ‘conversation’ opens up a space for more engaged participation on the part of the interviewer in forming a narrative.

---

68 See: p. 40.

69 This issue is tackled by Van Saaze, who observes that in conservation the interview as a format was long perceived as a “one-way, straightforward, value-free tool during which information is simply retrieved from the artist” (van Saaze, 2009c, p. 23). The concept of ‘minimal intervention’, as mentioned already in the introduction to this study (see: p. 11), is one of the traditional principles of conservation, and is applied mainly to treatments. This principle has recently been contested, especially in relation to contemporary art (see e.g.: Stigter, 2016, p. 78). However, the principle persists in conservation-related activities, such as the artist interview. As Stigter observes, “to keep possible interference at a minimum conservators are trained to keep a low profile while conducting interviews, ask open questions, and keep silent” (Stigter, 2016, p. 93).
Within the framework of oral history, the concept of the ‘invisible interviewer’ was questioned by, among others, Alessandro Portelli, who asserts that an interview is a form of dialogue, and argues that it is valuable precisely because it facilitates the exchange of perspectives (Portelli, 2018). According to the Italian oral historian, the interview is a “historical and social event that creates a bivocal dialogical linguistic construct and wreaks significant changes both in the narrator and in the interviewee” (Portelli, 2018).

Another aspect that is useful for rethinking the artist interview is embedded in the definition of oral history provided by Abrams, who describes it as “both a research methodology (...) and the result of the research process” (Abrams, 2010, p. 2), and as such embraces within the concept both the process and the product. This issue is also addressed by other oral historians such as Alexander Freund, who states that accessibility to other researchers is what distinguishes oral history from qualitative interviews conducted in other disciplines (Freund, 2009). A similar line of thought is followed by historian Donald A. Ritchie, who states that

An interview becomes an oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication. Availability for general research, reinterpretation, and verification defines oral history. By preserving the tapes and transcripts of their interviews, oral historians seek to leave as complete, candid, and reliable a record as possible. (Ritchie, 2003)

The emphasis on the idea of the interview as a stable source is a reaction to the fact that this aspect, although acknowledged and addressed in the conservation literature on the artist interview, is often overlooked in museum practice. For instance, accessibility can prove difficult to balance with the need to protect participants’ intellectual property and confidentiality. While outside of the main scope of this dissertation, this topic will be persistently revisited in the course of the book and examined in depth in the last chapter.
This section has demonstrated that the artist interview and the oral history interview have a great deal in common, and these commonalities create a space for the transfer of knowledge and experience. Compared with the field of contemporary art conservation, oral history is an established discipline with a robust tradition, and as such could potentially help develop these aspects of the artist interview, whose theoretical underpinnings and methodological expertise have yet to reach maturity. Oral history theory provides a basis to approach such issues as subjectivity or source accessibility, as well as the arguments in favour of approaching the interview as a conversation or dialogue. Nevertheless, from the perspective of this book, the most significant concept that oral history brings to the table is the difference between collecting facts and collecting stories, and the definition of the artist interview, as tailored for the sake of this study, will take this condition as its starting point.

1.3.5 Institutional Approaches to Interviewing Artists

Nowadays many, if not most, contemporary art institutions regularly interview artists. There are diverse goals behind these undertakings, conservation being just one of them. This section offers a brief overview of the efforts of selected museums and organisations, with the aim of showing different approaches to collecting, storing and sharing artists' utterances from the present moment or the recent past. Some of the examples relate in some way to the present study, while others illustrate general tendencies in the field.

Tate, a national-level institution that holds the largest collection of contemporary art in the UK, interviews artists in several different ways. In contrast to other museums, this practice is explained and presented to the public on the museum website in a relatively

---

70 This assumption is based on the study of the content of institutional online platforms and diverse online channels of communications, mainly in the context of English- and Spanish-speaking countries. However, it is important to mention that the information about the practice of interviewing artists is rarely described in detail on the organizations’ websites. Therefore, in some cases the account presented is based on other available sources, from journal articles to blog entries. Accordingly, in some instances the identification of the interview purpose is based on assumptions or deduced from the course of an interview itself.
detailed way. Many of the interviews are collection-related and are conducted by curators and conservators in order to gather insights into the future care and display of particular artworks. Others are undertaken in relation to exhibitions, events or research projects. The interviews are audio or video recorded, and some of them are accessible through Tate’s website, in a highly edited short form. The magazine *Tate Etc* and online journal *Tate Papers* also publish interviews with artists. Transcripts of these interviews that are not shared online or in print can be obtained through Gallery Records by appointment following a review of the text for confidential material. On the website of the interview project, there is a link to a spreadsheet that lists an impressive 766 interviews with artists and art world figures conducted between 1979 and the beginning of 2015. 239 of these interviews originated from the conservation department. One of the interviews conducted at Tate by a conservator and for conservation purposes will be analysed extensively further on, in Chapter 2.

An interesting and exemplary initiative is that of the Washington-based Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. In 2012 the conservation department started its *Artist Interview Program: Capturing the Contemporary* as a preservation-focused and at the same time museum-wide initiative (G. Ryan & O’Banion, 2015). From the outset, the project was oriented towards building relationships with artists represented in the collection, rather than being seen as a one-time opportunity to “nail down an artist’s response to a list of questions” (G. Ryan & O’Banion, 2015, p. 14). The program triggered trans-departmental collaborations. For instance, an interview prepared jointly by a conservator and a curator might be conducted as a public talk.

---


72 The issue of confidentiality in relation to Tate’s archives will be discussed later on (see: Chapter 5, p. 301)

73 The latest interview is dated 19 February 2015. The numbers of interviews per year are as follows: 2014 – 56 interviews; 2013 – 48; 2012 – 58; 2011 – 66; 2010 – 62; 2009 – 64; 2008 – 63; 2007 – 79; 2006 – 15; 2005 – 10; 2004 – 8; 2003 – 9; 2002 – 5; 2001 – 4; between 1979-2000 around 200 interviews were conducted. Interestingly, the interview with Mirosław Balka analysed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, conducted by Tate’s conservator during this very period, is not listed in the document. The list also does not include public talks with artists organized by Tate, and therefore it can be assumed that the overall number of interviews may in fact be much larger. See: *Interviews with Artists and Art World Figures.* (2014). Retrieved from https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/interviews-artists-and-art-world-figures.
organized by the education department, while the recording could in turn be produced and disseminated by the communications department. However, the Hirshhorn does not work with one particular interview format. Interestingly, despite the fact that film recording is acknowledged as the desired output for interdepartmental usage, Ryan also includes written communication and phone calls under the umbrella term ‘interview’.74

A cross-disciplinary approach is also a part of the practice of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), which has one of the longest-running artist interview programmes in the field, dating back to the mid-1990s. Interviews with artists whose works form part of the museum’s collection are produced by an Interpretative Media team and cover a broad spectrum of subjects related to the respondent’s artistic practice (Gangsei, 2015). Interviews are professionally filmed, preferably in the artist’s studio. Almost 300 short videos made from the recordings are publicly accessible on the museum website.75 On top of this continuous practice, in 2014 SFMOMA launched The Artist Initiative, a series of collaborative, interdisciplinary research projects aiming at developing models for fostering collaboration between conservators and curators through joint work with artists (Clark & Barger, 2016).76

---

74 Artist Interview Program: Capturing the Contemporary has its own entry on the museum website (see: Artist Interview Program - Hirshhorn Museum. Retrieved from https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/about-artist-interview-program/), which currently [as of January 2019] lists 15 interviews conducted between 2013 and 2015. Interviews are not accessible directly but upon request by email.

75 See: Artist Interviews · SFMOMA. Retrieved from https://www.sfmoma.org/series/artist-interviews/.

76 The initiative, funded by the W. Mellon Foundation, comprises five research projects that serve the curatorial collecting departments of the museum: Photography, Painting and Sculpture, Media Art, and Architecture and Design. Three of the projects are monographic studies, examining the work of Ellsworth Kelly, Vija Celmins, and Julia Scher in depth, while two more are thematic, exploring modes of displaying digitally-driven design objects, and developing strategies for addressing the problem of colour shift common to photographic prints made with experimental materials during the 1970s and 1980s. The aim of the project is to develop practices that allow for embedding a cross-disciplinary approach to the collections’ care beyond the lifetime of the grant (Clark & Barger, 2016).
New York’s MoMA follows a slightly different approach than its Californian counterpart. The interviews with artists are produced by separate departments and for various purposes. Between 2011 and 2012, thanks to an anonymous donation, MoMA Archives initiated its Oral History Program. The grant covered the management of existing interviews, not only with artists but also with staff, donors and trustees, as well as the production of new ones. The artist section holds 14 interviews that are available online, the older ones in the form of transcripts and the newer ones also as excerpts of video recordings. Artists were interviewed by curators and independent art historians in the museum study centre in the presence of artworks from the collection (Theobalds, 2012), though the conversations were not limited to the works present, covering issues related to the whole set of artworks owned by the institution. For instance, in the case of Edward Ruscha, there are 169 entries in the collection section of the MoMA website, which represents almost the entirety of the artist’s oeuvre, and the interview reflects this range. Judging from the fact that the last interview listed on the website was filmed in 2012, the public face of the programme was discontinued once the funding had been spent. This does not mean that MoMA ceased to interview artists, however. There is considerably more material accessible through other media, for instance MoMA’s YouTube channel or TuneIn profile, which hosts audio recordings from the MoMA Talks series. These interviews, although made for various purposes, mostly in relation to events or exhibitions, also include information about artworks from the collection. Some of it is also highly valuable from a conservation perspective, as will be demonstrated in the following sections of this study.

An outstanding initiative that should be mentioned in the context of the present-day practice of interviewing artists is the US-based organization Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA). Though not a museum itself, VoCA influences the practices of most of

---

77 See: Oral history. Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/oral-history#artist-oral-history-initiative. In the course of this research I have attempted to access the videos on numerous occasions, but unfortunately the out-dated links are no longer functional.

78 For the MoMA YouTube channel see: https://www.youtube.com/user/MoMAvideos, for TuneIn see: https://tunein.com/radio/MoMA-Talks-Conversations-p411412/?topicId=105239120.

79 See the study on Danh Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ (Chapter 3, p. 179).

the large-scale North American institutions by organizing *Artist Interview Workshops* for museum professionals. Besides its educational mission, the organization runs a journal and a series of public programmes called *VoCA Talks*, which feature artists and their collaborators in conversation about challenges inherent in making, showing, and preserving contemporary art. Although conservation oriented, *VoCA*’s approach to interviewing is built on interdisciplinarity and focuses on putting artists at the centre of the discussion about the future of their work. Interestingly, *VoCA* explores the possibilities offered by the framework of oral history through a collaboration with Richard Cándida Smith, who is well known for his writings on the role of oral history in the documentation of visual and performing art.

This is only a small selection of the few initiatives outlined as specific projects or programmes. Nevertheless, there are a number of art institutions that conduct interviews and publish them online without framing their approach in any particular way. At the same time, there is also a significant body of interviews that are not accessible, including those made particularly for conservation purposes. These diverse practices show how all the threads described in previous sections – interviews with the artist as a genre, the artist interview for conservation purposes and the oral history approach – are intertwined in everyday museum practice. Although not all of the practices will fit within the definition of the artist interview as proposed in the following section, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that all of them are valuable sources for informing decisions related to an artwork’s future. As such, they enter the realm of the artwork’s documentation, which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

### 1.3.6 Towards a Definition of the Artist Interview

Drawing on concepts borrowed from oral history theory and the analysis of different experiences from the field, including the author’s own experience, the artist interview in contemporary-art conservation-related research is defined in this dissertation as an approach, rather than a tool. It is a compound, process-based method that presents all

---

81 See e.g. the Walker Art Center, the Los Angeles County Museum of Arts and many more. A comprehensive list of the diverse institutional initiatives related to interviewing artists can be found in Fresno-Guillem’s doctoral dissertation, see: Fresno-Guillem, 2017, pp. 125–138.

82 This issue will be addressed in depth later on, see: Chapter 5, p. 301.
the complexities related to interviewing as seen from the perspective of oral history, as well as to the genre of interviews with artists in the milieu of the art world. The interview as a process implies preparatory research, the encounter(s) with the artist and the post-production (transcript, annotations and analysis) that converts the outcome into a stable source suitable for use in further research. The interview as an encounter is framed as an oral, semi-structured, guided conversation with an artist, where the interviewer plays the role of a guide. In the context of this study, the interview concerning a particular artwork stands in the foreground, due to the way in which museum collections are organised and how the case-study-centred fieldwork has structured the research for this dissertation. The purpose of the artist interview relates directly to characteristics of a contemporary artwork as defined at the beginning of this chapter. As follows, the main aim of this method is to identify and document an artwork’s features: its conceptuality, contextuality, processuality and media variability as conceived by the artist. This definition assumes that one cannot gather information on these rather abstract and complex notions by asking direct questions, but rather by gleaning answers from artists’ stories, as they discuss the different stages of their involvement in the artwork’s biography. Following this line of thinking, the goal of the artist interview is to collect an artist’s stories concerning a particular artwork. At the same time, these accounts might be a valuable source of factual data that will prove useful for conservators and historians, such as information about the materials and techniques used to make the art object. Nevertheless, the assemblage of stories for further interpretation prevails as an objective of the interview over the gathering of facts, since the latter should be regarded as filtered through the memory of the respondent.

It is important to clarify that this rather precise but still ‘working’ definition has been crafted specifically for the purpose of this study, with the intention to test how this ‘model interview’ might work in contemporary art museums. It does not imply that

---

83 The emphasis on the artist is key in this sentence. In both institutional and non-institutional conservation practice, interviews with other participants in the creation of the artwork are often included under the umbrella of the artist interview. This dissertation places interviews with assistants, family members, gallerists, producers etc. outside the scope of the artist interview. This does not mean that the accounts of other parties involved should not be considered important for conservation purposes, but simply that they pertain to a different category.
other interview formats would not be beneficial for decisions regarding an artwork’s possible futures. On the contrary, this dissertation encourages the recognition of all the sources produced around an artwork throughout its career as potentially necessary for grasping its identity, and in consequence for ensuring its perpetuation. Based on this premise, in the context of a museum, the artist interview will be considered as a part of the entire body of documentation produced by the institution on a particular artwork from the collection.

1.4 The Artist Interview within the Museum Milieu: Revisiting the notion of documentation

1.4.1 Documenting Art as an Artistic Practice

In the case of art documentation as an art form […] it is not “the making of …” any finished artwork that is documented. Rather, documentation becomes the sole result of art, which is understood as a form of life, a duration, a production of history. (Groys, 2002a)

To establish a firm basis to reflect on the functions and uses of the artist interview within the framework of the museum, this subchapter presents subjects related to the documentation of an artwork as part of an institutional collection – its purpose, shifting roles, structure, and concerns related to the nature of a document. Yet, before entering the institutional realm, the following section offers a general overview of the current condition of the notion of documentation in the contemporary art context. Its starting point is the assumption that since museums are a part of the art world, the general discourses in art history and theory affect how specific, museum-related concepts might be perceived and used by actors from outside the institutions’ walls, artists included. It also argues that a familiarity with artistic practices that incorporate the process and grammar of documentation might be key for the interpretation and, in consequence, preservation of contemporary artworks.84

Any discussion of artworks’ museum records must necessarily address the growing prominence in recent artistic practice of documentation itself as a framework for visual art. This phenomenon, whose origins date back to the first half of the 20th century, can be divided into two categories – the production of documents as a result of art, as Groys frames the issue in the above-cited excerpt, and the exploitation of existing documentation in artistic practice. The first one pertains to the emergence of happenings, actions and events in the 1950s, especially related to radical artistic movements such as Fluxus. The ephemerality of such events impeded their reaching a wide audience, and documentation emerged as one of the means to overcome this problem. The increase in the importance of documentation was also fostered by the rise of conceptual practices, which in the absence of art objects resulted in the production of evidence: from drawings representing an idea to imagery depicting processes and their outcomes. Already in the late 1960s/early 1970s when Lucy Lippard influentially diagnosed a dematerialisation of the art object (Lippard, 1973), the distinction between artwork and documentation had begun to blur, and artists exploited this ambiguity of categories in their own practice in numerous ways. Illustrating this drift is Yves Klein’s Leap into the Void (1960) – a photomontage made out of images taken by Harry Shunk that represents a performance which never actually took place. Another prominent example is The Shadow (1981), by French artist Sophie Calle, who asked her mother to hire a private detective to follow her for a day and document her activities. This documentation of a one-day performance – photographs and a textual report – are framed and hung on the wall as an autonomous artwork.

Within the category of documents produced as a result of art, special attention should be given to the documentation of performance art pieces, whose continued existence, due to their very nature, fully relies on documentation. In the past, live performances were considered uncollectable because of their intangible nature. Museums collected instead things related to a performance, such as the material remains or the documentation of the event, but not the performance itself as a live

85 As Sanneke Stigter aptly observed, in Lippard’s text the dematerialisation of the material object does not equal its ‘disappearance’, but rather acknowledges the importance of the idea over the material product (see: Stigter, 2016, p. 50).
event. This is the case of early performances by Marina Abramović & Ulay, which found their way into museum collections in the form of photographs and video pieces – i.e. documentation. However, since the early 2000s the situation has changed, and museums have started to collect live works by acquiring the means and the rights to re-perform them (Laurenson & van Saaze, 2014). This drift has resulted both from and in extensive research on the theory and practice of performance documentation that arose at the crossroads of studies in visual and performing arts, such as dance and dramaturgy. This area of research has approached theoretical concepts related to documents and documentation in a novel way, and therefore has been highly influential for the development of the argument presented in this dissertation.

The second category is related to the surge of interest in documenting, documentation, and archiving as art practices over the past twenty years. This tendency, diagnosed by Hal Foster as an “Archival Impulse”, began to proliferate with the new millennium and took on multifarious shapes (Foster, 2004). Artists began to employ whole archives in order to reveal and dismantle their authoritative function, and this phenomenon is especially interesting in the institutional context, as it generated a critical discourse on the character and role of institutional archives. One of the most radical examples of this drive is Andrea Fraser’s installation Information Room (1998), where the artist assembled the usually inaccessible archives of the Bern Kunsthalle in the institution’s new information room, playing with the archive behind the museum, with its visibility or invisibility, and with the way these two concepts relate to each other (Spieker, 2008).

Little by little, instigated by these tendencies and others, documents have also taken over the realm of art exhibitions. Sometimes documents are introduced by artists as artworks, sometimes by curators to complete the story told with artworks. This process can be traced back to the advent of conceptual art, the curatorial activities of Seth

---

86 For instance, while the video from the well-known 1980 performance piece Rest Energy by Abramović & Ulay was collected, among others, by Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam holds in their collections polaroid photographs illustrating the event.

87 See the work of Gabriella Giannachi (Giannachi, 2016; Westerman & Giannachi, 2018).

Siegelaub and especially the famed January 5-31, 1969 show in New York City. In this extraordinary exhibition featuring Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner, the only physical object on display was a publication presenting the participants’ concepts and statements on the nature of their practice. Interestingly, in a group exhibition organized the same year in Düsseldorf, Siegelaub presented the work of the same artists in the form of self-interviews to appear in the show’s catalogue. In this context not only documentation, but also the interview, constituted an artwork in its own right (Alberro, 2003, p. 163).

All these circumstances place documents and documentation at the centre of contemporary artistic inquiry and strongly influence their general status in the art context. Documents have lost their innocence, their immediate association with veracity, and as such have become ambiguous, potentially deceitful but no less intriguing, and this condition should be taken into account while discussing the notion of documenting as an institutional preservation strategy.

1.4.2 Documentation in a Museum Collection Context and Challenges

Related to Documenting ‘New Art’

Museum documentation is concerned with the development and use of information about the objects within a museum collection and the procedures which support the management of the collection. This information should be recorded in written or digital form in a museum documentation system and should be accessible to staff, researchers and the public. (ICOM-CIDOC, 2012, p. 1)

This dissertation argues that in the context of a museum, the artist interview should be studied as a part of the body of documentation of a collected artwork. This assumption requires a brief explanation of how documentation is framed in the museum field. The above-cited definition by the ICOM International Committee for Documentation (CIDOC) offers a rather broad explanation. Yet, based on this premise, in practical terms documentation can be both: a process of gathering and organizing information

about a musealium (an artwork in the case of art museums), as well as a set of documents resulting from this process. There are many reasons for documenting artworks from the museum collection. Building on a list developed by Dekker et al., these motives can be identified as follows: publicity and presentation, conservation, development of an aesthetic and/or historical ‘framework’, or reference and education (Dekker, Wijers, & Van Saaze, 2012).

Expanding on the description offered by conservator and conservation theorist Gunnar Heydenreich (2011), documentation in the museum framework might be defined as a correlation of two categories of activities. The first one is selecting, recording and producing information on an artwork, mainly related to its physical features, meanings and interpretations, history, context, condition and presentation. The second one consists of processes related to the management of this information, for instance organizing, linking, archiving, updating and disseminating (Heydenreich, 2011). The way the documentation of a musealium can be outlined and organized within an art museum varies from institution to institution and depends on a museum’s history, subject, scale and structure. Still, there are common approaches, procedures, workflows and standards that should be mentioned in this section, as they will be referred to often in the chapters presenting case studies. In most institutions the operational core and the main reference in structuring the information about the collection is the Collection Management System (CMS), software that offers a database for tracking information related to particular objects. Usually the record of a musealium in the CMS includes all the basic factual data about an artwork, as well as references to other sources of information. However, the CMS usually does not allow for storing and managing graphic and textual documents (Barok, Noordegraaf, & de Vries, 2019), which are therefore frequently placed in the museum archive. The latter is usually not a singular entity, but rather consists of a network of different archives, both analogue and digital.

90 An extensive list of possible types of documents that can be produced around an artwork has been compiled on the website of DOCAM (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage), see: Typology of documents. (2005). Retrieved from http://www.docam.ca/en/typology-of-documents.html.

91 For more information about the organization of information within an art museum see: Wythe, 2004.

92 Collection Management Systems are the digital successors of traditional paper inventory cards and therefore from the outset have mimicked their structure.
The way the documents are dispersed among these archives varies depending on an institution’s departmental structure (Stigter, 2016, p. 18). For instance, photographic documentation might be stored on a specific server, while the textual information about the way an artwork should be displayed might be housed in the records of an exhibition in which it was presented. The history of the artwork’s creation written for the purpose of the catalogue might be stored in the archive of the department responsible for publishing, etc. Numerous institutions work with so-called ‘object files’ that compile essential information related to the artwork, and allow this information to be shared between departments and with the public, mostly by appointment. The organization of the information and documentation strategies in the museums studied here will be presented in the successive case-study chapters. Chapter 5 expands on the notion of museum archive and tackles in depth various related concepts, such as the object file and its accessibility (see: p. 295).

Traditionally, the goal of documentation as a conservation tool focused on describing the object “in the best objective way possible” (Dekker et al., 2012, p. 22), mainly by means of text, numbers and images. Most of the conventional documentation methods consist of different kinds of imaging techniques and measurements and are akin to natural science research. Yet, with the shift in artistic practices in visual arts, the scope and the role of documentation has changed significantly. As Pip Laurenson once claimed, “conservation is no longer focused on intervening to repair an art object; it is now concerned with documentation and determining what change is acceptable and managing those changes” (Laurenson, 2004, para. 5). To ensure the future comprehensibility of the art created in the last decades, documentation has to cover multiple dimensions of the artwork’s nature. This might mean documenting its physical appearance; the space, acoustics, light levels, tactility and olfactory effects; and the way one enters and leaves the installation (Laurenson, 2004), but also conceptual characteristics such as function, interactivity, variability and meanings. In other words, as the identity of a contemporary artwork is to a certain extent conveyed through its non-tangible aspects, the importance of documentation as a conservation

---

93 Among the institutions within the scope of this study, Tate, MoMA and Centre Pompidou work with this format. More information about object files and issues related to their accessibility is provided in Chapter 5 (p. 295).
method has shifted significantly.\textsuperscript{94} Interestingly, within the museum field this shift can be observed even in areas unrelated to art. The nature of many collections has expanded following the recognition of intangible heritage – such as social practices, rituals, or traditional craftsmanship. This means that the material object has in many cases become secondary, while the documentation of processes – collecting included – has come to occupy a central position (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010). However, these changes have proven problematic for conventional museological documentation systems, especially CMSs, which were originally designed for documenting fixed, stable objects (Barok et al., 2019; Engel & Wharton, 2017; Heydenreich, 2011; Phillips, 2015; van Saaze, 2013b). In the art context this problem can be illustrated with the example of Collection Management Systems, which were developed for traditional art forms such as paintings and sculptures, and normally do not take into consideration complex media installations, software-based art or any other works which are process-based and/or variable in terms of media (Heydenreich, 2011).\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{94} The rise in the importance of documentation for conservation in the case of contemporary art has been discussed in numerous articles, e.g. Heydenreich, 2011, Hummelen & Scholte, 2006; Hummelen & Scholte, 2004. Documentation of contemporary art was also the topic of the international conference held in Lisbon in 2013 titled "Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art" (the proceedings from the conference were published in a special issue of Revista de Historia da Arte, a journal published by the Instituto de Historia da Arte of Universidade Nova de Lisboa; available online at: http://revistaharte.fesh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAw4.pdf).


\textsuperscript{95} Databases for the documentation of contemporary art are the subject of separate research carried out by Dušan Barok at the University of Amsterdam within the framework of the research and training network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA). On the consequences of the object-based design of the art museum for the perpetuation of contemporary artworks, see Chapter 4.

Vivian van Saaze (2013) has described one interesting case of the incompatibility of a CMS with the needs of contemporary art. In 2003 the Van Abbemuseum acquired a version of the exhibition No Ghost Just a Shell, instigated by artists Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe and including work by other artists. However, to be accounted for as an acquisition, it needed to be fragmented into single objects or registered under one entry, which did not comply with the character of the project. This problem was solved by creating special ‘work sets’ in the museum CMS that created a link between individual pieces, while also making it possible to designate a single inventory number to the project as a whole (Graham, 2014).
In parallel to changes in art itself, both theoretical and technical approaches to documentation have evolved as well. In the first place, the field has, by and large, come to acknowledge the subjectivity of the documentation process as being dependent on the selection criteria of documentalists, as well as other factors. This, in turn, coincided with the accessibility of new technologies for document management, storage and retrieval systems, and later on with the large-scale digitalization of information. As a consequence of these changes, new ways of thinking about the practice of documentation have emerged, resulting in numerous local and international research projects focused on developing new documentation models for contemporary art. It is important to stress at this point that most of these initiatives have focused on certain categories of artworks in relation to their medium or form, predominantly on installations, media art and performance. Although in most cases these models have not been implemented directly in the museum context, they have often served as a basis or inspiration for building institutional strategies for documentation, again principally in relation to the aforementioned ‘new’ artwork categories. Importantly, all of these models acknowledge the significance of information obtained from the artist, mostly in form of the artist interview.

The notion and organisation of ‘artwork-related documentation’ in museums that collect contemporary art is neither standardised nor fixed and, moreover, it is currently facing major challenges. As the case-study chapters will demonstrate, these challenges are often related to the traditional structure of the art museum, oriented towards a unique, stable object – a condition incompatible with the changeable nature

---

96 See e.g. Stigter, 2015; van Saaze, 2015.
98 The Matters in Media Art model has been applied at Tate, while the Documentation Model for Time-Based Media Art has been developed and implemented at the Guggenheim. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives have depended on short-term private and public funding, and in consequence have been unsustainable in the long run (Dekker et al., 2012).
of contemporary art. Despite the recognition of the importance of the intangible characteristics of contemporary art for its preservation, institutional conservation-oriented documentation is still mainly focused on objects. At the same time, the four features that potentially shape the identity of a contemporary artwork – conceptuality, contextuality, processuality and media-variability – are usually recorded in documents produced and/or collected outside the conservation area, for instance in the curatorial department. These documents are often conceived for purposes other than conservation, which in the museum is understood as the task of conservators, and as such are often not taken into consideration when evaluating an artwork’s possible futures. In consequence, the major problem with documenting and therefore preserving contemporary art lies in the lack of interaction between documentation produced expressly for conservation purposes and other kinds of documents that might be essential for an artwork’s perpetuation.

The problems with documenting contemporary art for conservation purposes have been addressed in numerous research projects. However, they are usually only tackled in relation to a particular medium/format instead the artwork as a whole, mimicking the object-based structure of the museum. This dissertation approaches these problems differently by proposing a theoretical model which, by redefining the concept of the collected artwork and its documentation, offers solutions for documenting and, in consequence, preserving the changeability of a contemporary artwork across institutional divisions and categories.
1.4.3 The Art Object as Document and Documented: Shifting our perspective on the notion of contemporary artwork documentation

Increasingly, in art spaces today we are confronted not just with artworks but with art documentation. The latter can also take the form of paintings, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations – that is to say, all the same forms and media in which art is usually presented [...]. (Groys, 2002a, p. 1)

Adopting the perspective applied in the field of performance art studies, this section considers the nature of documentation from the point of view of information sciences, and introduces the notion of the art object as a document, and of documentation as a matrix or network of signs. The latter concept will allow for a reflection on documentation’s internal hierarchy, and for re-defining the documentation of contemporary artwork within the museum context. The result of this digression is a proposed theoretical model of artwork-related documentation that will be used throughout this dissertation, on the one hand to help understand why the existing institutional infrastructure is inefficient for the preservation of contemporary art, and on the other to offer possible means of improving its potential.

First of all, it is important to distinguish between document and documentation: while a document is created for a specific purpose and can become part of the documentation on an artwork, documentation is often seen as the process of making documents accessible, therefore making it a secondary concern (Dekker, 2018). Following archival or library science, documentation is the standardized management of documents for long-term access or re-use. Returning to the notion of ‘document’, traditionally common information storage and retrieval systems have been concerned mostly with text and text-like records (Buckland, 1997). Nevertheless, in France in the late 1920s, museum objects too were included by some documentalists within the definitions of ‘document’ (Buckland, 1997). Regardless of these two opposing positions, in the mid-20th century, the work of European pioneers of information science such as Paul Otlet

---

and Suzanne Briet brought other physical forms of ‘information’ to the discussion. Otlet is known for his observation that documents could be three-dimensional, which enabled the inclusion of sculpture (Buckland, 1997). His view on what a document is comprised objects originally not intended for communication, for instance traces of human activity such as archaeological finds. 100 Briet in her seminal book What is Documentation? developed even further the idea of the possible forms a document could take, stating that “the forms that the documentary work assumes are as numerous as the needs from which they are born” (Briet, 2006, p. 36). 101

Yet Briet’s theoretical approach deserves a closer look, because besides allowing objects to be included in the definition of a document, it also provides a vision of documentation as a dynamic network of interrelations and a crucial aspect of knowledge production. The starting point for her definition of a document was the one proposed by the French Union of Documentation Organizations, where documents were classified as “all bases of materially fixed knowledge, and capable of being used for consultation, study, and proof” (Briet, 2006, p. 10). Nevertheless, Briet challenges the traditional, positivist vision of the document “as a proof [evidence] in support of a fact” and expands it to “any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [indice], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon” (Briet, 2006, p. 10). According to Briet, a star is not a document, but a photograph of a star is; a stone is not a document, but a stone in a mineralogical collection is; an animal in the wild is not a document, but an animal in a zoo is (Briet, 2006, p. 11). The implication of this categorisation is that documentation should not be viewed as related to a textual record, but understood within a broader notion of access to evidence and context. Is an art object in the museum collection also a document? Following Briet’s definition, it might be seen as such. If so, an art object included in the institutional collection would be evidence of the artistic practice.

100 Later on, Roland Barthes, in discussing “the semantics of the object”, wrote that objects function as the vehicle of meaning: in other words, the object effectively serves some purpose, but it also serves to communicate information: we might sum this idea up by saying that there is always a meaning which surpasses the object’s use (Barthes, 1988, p. 182).

101 The work of Suzanne Briet has been analysed and applied as a theoretical framework in the context of contemporary art documentation by Corina MacDonald, Gabriella Giannachi, Rebeca Gordon and Annet Dekker; see: Dekker, 2018; Giannachi, 2016; Gordon, 2015; Macdonald, 2009.
of a certain artist, a document of certain tendencies in visual arts of the time, of the institutional collection policy, curatorial choices, and finally the artwork as such. In this light, accession to the museum collection might therefore constitute a shift in an artwork’s nature from artwork to artwork/document.\textsuperscript{102}

Furthermore, Briet classifies documents as primary, secondary and auxiliary. The second category refers to those that are created from the initial documents and the third to those which are created from the interrelation of documents (Giannachi, 2018). These categories should not be regarded as hierarchical in terms of value, as they merely illustrate ways in which a document can be produced. Briet notes that instances of documentation are contextual, and, rather than delivering the remains of an isolated phenomenon, they form a matrix or a network of signs. Through the juxtaposition, selection, and comparison of documents, a process that for Briet is genuinely creative, the content of documentation becomes ‘inter-documentary’ (Briet, 2006). This shift away from a traditional static documentary model reflects what Briet considered the essential quality of this new paradigm, which she referred to as “the dynamism of living documentation” (Briet, 2006, p. 41; C. Macdonald, 2009). The assumption that an art object is a primary document and a constructed phenomenon situated within or including networks of secondary and auxiliary documents may allow for a new understanding of documentation in the case of contemporary artworks.

Hence, the concept of documentation as built upon Briet’s approach comprises documents/signs that represent the artwork or some aspect of the artwork. It allows for the inclusion of an art object as a document that is equally important as the other elements comprising the artwork. An art object, or various art objects, might constitute the sole primary document, one of many primary documents, or even a secondary or auxiliary document. Documentation understood in this way is a dynamic system of interrelated documents that create knowledge by interacting with each other. To complete the conceptual construct, we should take a closer look at the issue of ‘internal hierarchy’, i.e. the relationship between the various documents. One helpful

\textsuperscript{102} This change in the nature of a collected artefact or artwork at the moment of entering the museum collection is also reflected in the term ‘musealisation’, as explained in Chapter 4 (see: p. 221).
metaphor for the approach I am proposing is the concept of the ‘rhizome’, borrowed from botany, where it describes a horizontally growing mass of roots capable of sending out roots and shoots from any one of its nodes (as in ginger, bamboo or crabgrass). In the 1980s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari employed this structure to describe networks of theory and research. Unlike the more common metaphor of the tree (as employed in genealogy or organisational diagrams), where the branches all fan out from a single trunk, the rhizome does not develop out of a single source; rather, it is heterogeneous and multiple, with no beginning, no end and no centre. It has many different entry points, all of which connect back to each other. Moreover, if a rhizome is broken or injured in one location, it will merely form a new line, a new connection that will emerge elsewhere (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Accordingly, rhizomatic artwork-related documentation is open-ended, decentralized and has non-hierarchical multiple entry and exit points.

1.4.4  Towards the Anarchival: From documentation to archive

The concept of artwork-related documentation, which builds on Briet’s approach to the notion of documentation, consists of documents in different forms and shapes – textual, sound-based, object-based, visual, verbal, etc. Its structure can be described as rhizomatic because all of the documents included have the potential to become imperative for the artwork’s reading, appreciation and perpetuation, and therefore possess a permanent archival value. As we have seen, a contemporary artwork is potentially variable in terms of media, and as such is not tied to any particular materialisation, but rather to the totality of its materialisations over time, with an immanently constructive and processual character. As such, each materialization in turn becomes at once a documentation (Osborne, 2018). As Peter Osborne (2018) argues, this suggests that a contemporary artwork comprises its own documentation and, to the extent that it proliferates and its iterations are collected, even becomes its own archive.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced the concept of the rhizome in their seminal book *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they underscore its “principles of connection and heterogeneity”: Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7)
At the same time, many of the documents that comprise artwork-related documentation live in museum archives – repositories of inactive historical records that are no longer used as originally intended. Interestingly, the value of museum archives has begun to gain recognition only in recent decades. Previously, it was understood that the role of museums was to collect objects according to their subject areas or collecting policies, and to identify, catalogue, preserve, interpret and present them to the public. The staff employed to carry out this work understood that their task was to document the collections of their institution, and recordkeeping was seen as an extension of curatorial activity (Brunskill & Demb, 2012). Consequently, in the museum environment, the focus of the recordkeeping effort was centred almost exclusively on the ‘museum object’, while museum activities unfolding around the collection were not documented in a structured way.

As late as 1986, John Fleckner, chief archivist at the National Museum of American History, lamented that archivists and museum employees worked in mutual isolation, having their own professional literature, support organisations, and methodology, “even for describing or carrying out similar functions” (Fleckner, 1986, p. 17). As a result of this longstanding lack of communication, until relatively recently museum professionals generally did not recognise the importance of documenting their activities by collecting, maintaining, and making accessible the records of their institutions (Wythe, 2004, p. 3). In consequence, although today museums generally acknowledge the importance of organising and maintaining an archive, a lack of standards has led to a vast array of approaches. In art museums, an archive is not a unique physical space in which ordered records are kept, but rather an abstract concept that embraces the entirety of the knowledge collected and produced within the institution. In fact, the documentation gathered by or produced in a museum is often dispersed among various micro-archives – such as the collection archive, exhibition archive or conservation archive – each of which is governed by different principles (Hölling, 2013, 2018). Within this state of affairs, the museum archive is rarely a stable entity, but rather an umbrella concept that adapts to the specificities of each institutional setting.

These two observations introduce another key concept in the argument presented in this dissertation – one which requires a proper introduction and a critical reflexion: the archive itself. The notion of the archive has been at the centre of discourses of cultural
theorists, observers and practitioners over the last fifty years (Giannachi, 2016). In
the postmodern era the archive has undertaken an ontological shift, from a physical
repository of documents to a metaphor signifying the means by which historical
knowledge and forms of remembrance – whether created by institutions or individuals
– are accumulated, stored and recovered (Merewether, 2006).

As literary scholar Ernst van Alpen (2014) observes, contemporary reflection on
the archive has been stimulated firstly by Michel Foucault’s seminal work *The
Archaeology of Knowledge*, which speaks about the role of archives in ‘the order of
of both philosophers, which brought about a so-called ‘postmodern turn’ in archival
science, the archive is first and foremost a construct that helps them to articulate their
ideas about human knowledge, thought, memory and power. For Foucault, the archive
is not an institution, a material site, or a collection of documents, but rather a system
that governs what is said or unsaid, recorded or unrecorded. The ‘archaeologist of
knowledge’ aims to recover and reconstruct the archive, in order to reveal how it shapes
our relationship with the past and the construction of historical meaning. Derrida’s
*Archive Fever* examines the archival impulse in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis,
arguing that psychoanalysis is in fact an archival practice as much as an archaeological
excavation of repressed memories. He proposes that humans’ compulsion towards
archiving is aimed at securing a future that is forever under threat of coming to an
end (Agamben, 2006; Merewether, 2006). The critical method of ‘deconstruction’
that is central to Derrida’s approach is premised on the idea that language and text
are unstable, and that this instability lies in the repression of alternative meaning that
takes place with every statement, since meaning is marked as much by absence as it
is by presence (Hardiman, 2009). *Archive Fever* reminds us that “there is no political
power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can
always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to
the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, p. 111).
The third voice in this discussion is that of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In
response to Foucault, he argues that in light of the phenomenon of testimony, which
arose amid catastrophic events such as those of WWII, under certain conditions the
relationship between the sayable and the unsayable becomes a relationship “between
a possibility and an impossibility of speech” (Agamben, 2006; Merewether, 2006).
By focusing on the speaking subject, he points out the conditions that enable or inhibit speech, which in the context of the archive makes even more evident the fragility of the archive’s authority (Merewether, 2006).

The postmodern archival paradigm shift steps away from viewing archival records as static, neutral physical objects or passive products of human or administrative activity. Archivists are no longer passive guardians of an inherited legacy that mechanically accumulates information, but instead are active agents shaping cultural and social memory and identity (Alphen, 2014). This perspective needs to be taken into account as a basis for the development of the argument presented in this dissertation, and for all discussions related to documentation, and, ultimately, to the archive itself (see: Chapter 5).

The archive entails some form of organisation of storage media for purposes extrinsic to the archive itself, and connotes origin and order (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). It is a powerful institution whose purpose is to maintain and expand the power of those who established and control it (Zielinski, Giannetti, & Fürlus, 2014). This implies classification, categorisation and authority – terms that are rarely compatible with the liberal and experimental character of contemporary artistic practice, or with the rhizomatic structure of the ‘artwork-related documentation’. The contradiction between the traditional principles of the archive and the character of today’s art led media theorist Siegfried Zielinski to coin the concept of ‘anarchives’. Zielinski states that adding the prefix an- liberates the archive from “the obsessive sense of order and the detailed claim to leadership” (Zielinski et al., 2014, p. 22). ‘Anarchives’, as a concept, emerged from the logic of multiplicity and variety, which makes them particularly suited to deal with time-based experiences, processes and events (Zielinski et al., 2014). They do not appropriate the truth about the origin of things, and most importantly, about their possible futures. They do not pursue a fixed design, and instead of promoting ‘the one and only story’ they organise micro-narratives. Zielinski illustrates the idea of anarchives with the disorder of personal archives, for instance those of artists, scholars or curators. For him, an example of the transformation of an anarchive into an archive is the deconstruction of the archive and library of influential curator Harald Szeemann when it was integrated into the Getty Research Institute. What has been termed the ‘individual methodology’ that Szeemann applied to
develop his exhibitions and artistic objects was significantly altered by its adaptation to the “universal order of a hygienically organized, representative cultural research archive” housed on the Getty Institute’s immaculate white shelves (Zielinski, 2015, p. 116; Zielinski et al., 2014). The concept of anarchives might strengthen the potential of the resonating structure of artwork-related documentation by offering the freedom to adjust its organisation according to the needs of a particular artwork.

1.5  Conservation: A working definition

The emergence of the specialisation in contemporary art conservation as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation pushed the boundaries of conservation as a discipline, forcing a broadening of the traditional notion of conservation as an activity. Nevertheless, this change is still in progress, which at this stage might lead to confusion over terminology, especially, but not exclusively, among people from outside the field. To put it simply, ‘conservation’ itself, a key term for this dissertation, may be understood differently depending on the reader’s involvement in recent discourses in the field of contemporary art conservation. Therefore, this section provides a tailor-made definition of conservation shaped in relation to the notion of contemporary art as explained before and grounded in the context of museum practices. Still, it is important to stress that this definition considers conservation not as a field or discipline but an approach that consists of a variety of tasks or activities.

The definitions of the terms ‘preservation’, ‘conservation’ and ‘restoration’ are the subject of on-going debate in the field. They differ according to specialisations within the profession, but also between language families. However, most of the debates are rooted in the same principles: that the conservation profession originated around material culture, and has built up a corpus of knowledge concerning materials, their behaviour, and options for their care (ICCROM, n.d.). The benchmark definition crafted by the Committee for Conservation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CC) is also material-oriented and states that the term covers “all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility

---

Note: For instance, the French conservateur translates as ‘curator’ or ‘keeper’; French conservators refer to themselves as either restaurateur or conservateur-restaurateur (Clavir, 2002, p. 3).
to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item” (ICOM-CC, 2008, unpaginated).

However, in light of the definition provided in the first section of this chapter (see: p. 36), for contemporary art the material object does not equal the artwork. Moreover, in relation to artworks, objects often have a secondary value and importance, and there are numerous examples of artworks within the scope of visual art lacking any material representation. Therefore, conserving a contemporary artwork (in contrast to conserving an art object) entails numerous activities that do not relate directly to the physical object. One such example is documentation (understood here as a practice), which in the case of contemporary art has turned its focus towards intangible qualities, as explained in previous sections. Another activity that might not be directly related to the physical object is presentation and all related actions. This shift has resulted in the central controversy in the field, illustrated here with an excerpt from an essay by conservation theorist Salvador Muñoz-Viñas:

Ideas cannot be actually treated for conservation or preservation; rather, they can be recorded, registered, enacted, remembered, performed, expressed, etc. There are no scalpels, no consolidates, no lining techniques that can cope with this task. Conservation does help to preserve some particular messages or meanings, but it necessarily does so by treating the material objects that convey those meanings or messages. Conservation needs materials that can be treated for it to work: this is an inherent trait of conservation as it is nowadays understood. In fact, when it comes to preserving pure ideas, there are other professionals who are better prepared for the job – be they historians, reporters, film-makers, archivists, photographers or computer technicians. (Muñoz-Viñas, 2010, p. 16)

Nevertheless, in the case of contemporary art the ‘conservation of ideas’ is not just a part of the conservation repertoire, but, as advocated in this dissertation, should be one of the main conservation-related activities for institutionally collected contemporary art. As a result, conservation may consist of other actions that Muñoz-Viñas has left out of the conservation toolbox in the above-quoted excerpt. However, his perspective raises
the question of whether the set of activities carried out to safeguard contemporary art can still be called 'conservation'. In other words, should conservation remain a material-oriented discipline, choosing instead a new name for the emerging field of caring for contemporary art? Although I do not aim to address this issue directly, this uncertainty persists between the lines of this dissertation (see, e.g. Chapter 3, p. 188).

Besides the ‘conservation of ideas’, adjacent fields such as digital preservation or dance have provided contemporary art conservation with other approaches that do not necessarily fit into the traditional notion of conservation. The emergence of forms of artistic expression such as performance art, software-based art or participatory practices has opened up the conservation toolkit to such strategies as migration, emulation, restaging or reinterpretation, which aim to secure the continuation of an artwork’s functionality without preserving the actual object (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014). These strategies are usually bound to a specific kind of art format, such as time-based media or performance; however, following the concept of media-variability, they can be potentially applicable to all contemporary art.

Starting from the assumption that the traditional notion of conservation needs to be expanded in order to ensure the future of contemporary works of art, and building on the former studies conducted in the field, this dissertation uses the term ‘conservation’ in a specific way. Conservation is understood here as an approach that includes all activities that stem from the methodological recognition of an artwork’s identity, are aimed at safeguarding the artwork’s continuation, and are performed in an informed, structured and documented manner. This definition is crafted for the purpose of

---

For the definitions of these terms within the field of digital art preservation, see e.g.: Serexhe, 2013.

This expanded notion of conservation is framed for the purpose of institutionally collected contemporary art. This definition was drafted by the author in collaboration with NACCA researcher Tomas Markevicius and presented during the group meeting of the research initiative Revisiting the Decision-Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation held in June 2018 at the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences (Giebeler et al., 2019). This definition has been influenced by the explanation of the term ‘conservation’ as provided by Sanneke Stigter for the purpose of her research into the conservation of conceptual artworks, which reads: “conservation consists of all activities that guarantee the continuation of an artwork’s life in an informed and controlled manner” (Stigter, 2016, p. 26).
contemporary art, with a primary focus on a museum framework. Its general character allows for embracing other conservation-related actions, such as preventive and remedial conservation, as well as restoration as it appears in ICOM-CC’s definition of conservation. In the context of this definition two terms – ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation’ – can be used interchangeably. To make a distinction I propose to outline the concept of ‘preservation’ according to its lexical meaning: ‘preserving’ – to protect, to keep safe, to keep from perishing – and consequently ‘preservation’ – the fact of being preserved.107 This expanded notion of conservation is understood as a set of scientific, technical and social activities that are performed by various individuals and groups, including conservation professionals (Avrami, Mason, & de la Torre, 2000). By encompassing the creation of heritage through musealisation, interpretation and education, it is seen as more inclusive than the traditional definition. Following this line of thought, in this book conservation is regarded as an effort of the whole collecting institution that acts on behalf of the communities which it represents.

1.6 Conclusions and Establishment of the Research Question

Parting from the premise that safeguarding the continuity of contemporary artworks continues to pose a challenge for art museums, this dissertation suggests that the structure of today’s museums and the notion of conservation that they employ do not match up with the needs of contemporary art. It aims to offer a model that might help bridge this gap while respecting certain foundations of the museum as a concept, especially the central position of the collection. The research follows this intention by looking at the collaboration between museums and artists, with a special focus on the artist interview. It traces uses of the interview in art institutions and reflects on its potential and functions.

This chapter has set the groundwork by defining concepts that will be essential to the argument – ‘contemporary art’, ‘artist interview’, ‘artwork-related documentation’ and ‘conservation’ – all of which could be understood in several different ways by museum

professionals. Each definition is set for a different purpose; whereas two are auxiliary ('contemporary art' and 'conservation'), the other two ('artist interview' and 'artwork-related documentation') are hypothetical and meant to be tested or expanded. The first term, 'contemporary art', establishes the object of the study by specifying its features. Applying a broad perspective of the art world and taking as its point of departure the literature from the field of contemporary art conservation, the author’s own experiences, and institutional practices described in the literature, the resulting definition sets the stage for the model ‘artist interview’. The principal role of this model, thought of not as an epitome of the method but rather an ideal to strive for, is to be tested in the case studies against the day-to-day institutional reality. The third and most complex concept introduced in this chapter is ‘artwork-related documentation’, which offers the basis for the development of the theoretical model featured in this dissertation, aimed at offering a solution for more efficient care of contemporary artworks in institutional collections. It does not reflect the reality of art museums, but proposes how this reality might be adapted to the needs of contemporary art in accordance with its distinctive characteristics. The definition of ‘artwork-related documentation’ will be tested, supported and expanded throughout this book by real-life examples drawn from the case studies. Lastly, the need to specify the use of the term ‘conservation’ is a practical one that originates from my own convictions and experiences. The definition offered here, far from the traditional understanding of the term in the museum field, offers a broader view on the scope of conservation tasks and is in line with my understanding of the nature and requirements of contemporary art.

While the mutual relationship between the four concepts presented above forms a theoretical framework for the development of my argument, two of them are meant to be examined and developed. The pillars of the study are the definition of the artist interview and the conceptualization of the artwork’s documentation, both grounded in museum collection-related practices. The artist interview has been outlined here as an approach consisting of the preparatory research, the recorded encounter(s) and the post-production that converts the outcome into a stable source. Its objective is to collect artists’ stories concerning a particular artwork from a museum collection. These stories, critical for defining the artwork’s identity, have a documentary character, and as such should be considered within a broader context of artwork-related documentation collected, produced and held by an institutional caretaker. The
notion of documentation is defined here as an open set, a dynamic system containing interrelated documents (signs) that represent an artwork. It is the interaction between its particular elements that forms our knowledge of the work. In this context, the art object as evidence of contemporary artistic practice is understood as but one of the documents included in the set, whose organization is based on the Deleuzean trope of the 'rhizome'.

Instituting the two ‘model’ concepts – the artist interview and documentation – raises questions concerning the relationship between them. While the structure of the model of artwork-related documentation is non-hierarchical and all elements hold equal status, they still may have different functions. Moreover, assuming that the position of the artist in relation to the artwork is privileged, a question arises as to if and how this supposition should be reflected in the content and/or organization of the documentation. What are the functions and uses of the artist interview within the body of documentation of a contemporary artwork in a museum collection? The following empirical portion of the study addresses this question through the analysis of numerous case studies examining day-to-day practices in museums that collect contemporary art.