Chapter 2

Setting the Scene: Meanings, sanctions and properties. Mirosław Balka and the many institutional approaches to conserving his work

If we take artworks seriously, and wish truly to grasp their natures, we must attend to the specific details that make each work what it is. As we shall see, these details sometimes include not only the features of the physical objects the artist has presented, but also the features of the surrounding situation in which the artist interacts with curators and institutions and thereby sanctions features of the work. Only by looking carefully at particular, real works can we develop adequate theories of contemporary art and, indeed, of art in general. (Irvin, 2005, p. 316)

2.1 Introduction: Field reconnaissance and survey of practices

2.1.1 Objectives, Methodology, Key Categories and Structure

In addition to the new museums specialising in contemporary art that have emerged over the last several decades, today many of the most venerable art institutions can be found collecting contemporary art as well. Contemporary artworks are kept, exhibited and cared for by institutions that differ substantially in scale, focus, structure, audience, modus operandi, and legal and cultural framework, in addition to how they conceptualise the very notion of contemporaneity. There are ‘traditional museums of contemporary art’ (Verschooren, 2007) which, according to sociologist Howard S. Becker, by purchasing an artwork give it the “highest kind of institutional approval” available in the contemporary visual art world (Becker, 1982). There are also the ‘radical’ ones, which are “more experimental, less architecturally determined,
and offering a more politicized engagement with our historical moment” (Bishop, 2013, p. 6). Large-scale museums, such as Tate, host collections that exceed seventy thousand artworks, and receive more than five million visitors each year, while small-scale institutions, like the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, hold only five hundred artworks and lack a permanent venue and storage space. The first step towards the stated aim of this dissertation – to understand why contemporary art continues to challenge art institutions in terms of the broadly understood notion of care – is to study today’s museum practices. But how are we to research the day-to-day routines of museums that vary among themselves and defy comparison? This chapter approaches this task by establishing focal points – particular topics that can be analysed and compared – and by indicating the sites of tension that make collecting and caring for contemporary art challenging for institutions. These issues, identified by analysing triangles of mutual relationships between a contemporary artwork, an artist and a museum in three case studies, will guide the further empirical investigation. The gateway to this constellation of relationships is the collaboration between artists and institutions oriented towards securing the perpetuation of collected artworks, and the central tool for this collaboration is the artist interview as defined in the previous chapter.

From a methodological perspective, this chapter employs ‘theoretical sampling’ as a strategy for theory building within qualitative research. This method is integral to the Grounded Theory approach and allows for the elaboration and refinement of presumed theoretical categories. It entails an overview of assembled data, constructing provisional ideas based on this data, and examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry (Charmaz, 2006, p. 102). By moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis, the theoretical sampling allows one to narrow down

---

108 Grounded Theory is a mode of analysis of qualitative research data that represents a way of generating theory on the basis of empirical research. Most GT investigations are been based on field research/participant observation and/or in-depth open-ended interviews (Clarke & Charmaz, 2007) which is equally true of my own research. However, it is necessary to stress that my research neither consistently follows the Grounded Theory approach nor employs many of the other tools developed within this research method (such as coding, memo-writing, saturation and sorting). However, the strategy of theoretical sampling has proved helpful in establishing the theoretical basis for my argumentation as well as designing the second phase of the fieldwork.
the preliminary scope of the research by abandoning or redefining concepts that do not contribute to the main line of argumentation, and discovering new bonds between the other categories. Consequently, three theoretical concepts that are essential in recent discourses in the conservation of contemporary art have been chosen as a guiding framework for crafting the trajectory of the main argument of this dissertation. These three concepts, recognized in the field as possible reference points for conservation decision making, are ‘artwork’s meanings’, ‘artist’s sanctions’ and ‘significant properties’.

The first theoretical concept examined in this chapter is ‘artwork’s meaning’, approached from the perspective of conservation. Elaborated in the late 1990s, The Decision-Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art (1999), which in the last two decades has become one of the main references for conservators in the field, is based on the assumption that “determining the meaning of the work prior to conservation is the foundation for responsible decision making in the conservation of modern art” (“The Decision-Making Model,” 1999, p. 7). The first section of this chapter critically explores the process of establishing the meaning of an artwork, ponders over the challenges posed by this task, and examines if and how collaboration with the artist might help in achieving this goal. It demonstrates the polysemy of the contemporary artwork and the dynamics behind the process of meaning making, and argues that establishing one meaning as a reference is not only challenging but often undesirable.

In her seminal study on how contemporary artworks acquire their shape, philosopher Sherri Irvin presented an alternative theoretical category to the contested concept of artist’s intent “construed as a mental state or as behavioral disposition” (Irvin, 2005, p. 315).109 This category, termed by Irvin as ‘artist’s sanctions’, is the second theoretical concept tackled in this chapter. According to Irvin, artist’s sanctions are actions and statements given by an artist at a certain moment in time that fix specific features of a work. These features have a potential to generate interpretations and indicate which possible future states are relevant for the understanding of an artwork (Irvin, 2005). The second subchapter examines the notion of artist’s sanctions as a potentially useful

---

109 For more about the controversy centred on the issue of artist’s intention and its repercussions in the field of art conservation see: Chapter 1, p. 49.
conceptual framework to scrutinize the relationship between artists and their works, looks at how artists sanction their work, and analyses how to relate to these sanctions in conservation decision making.

The third concept, ‘significant properties’, was introduced into the field of conservation by scholar and practitioner Pip Laurenson as a part of a conceptual framework for the care of time-based media installations (Laurenson, 2006). The term was borrowed from the archive community, which defined it as “characteristics of digital objects that must be preserved over time in order to ensure the continued accessibility, usability, and meaning of the objects, and their capacity to be accepted as evidence of what they purport to record” (Grace, Knight, & Montague, 2009 cited in Laurenson, 2014, p. 76). Laurenson suggests that instead of focusing on the physical entity, which needs to be kept in its authentic state, time-based media artworks can be ‘restaged’ time and again on the basis of work-defining properties. Following the line of thinking presented in the previous chapter, in contemporary art the medium is of minor importance and therefore from the perspective of this study medium-based classifications are not useful. Accordingly, I assume that Laurenson’s term is extendable to all contemporary artworks and I apply it here to an artwork which supposedly does not belong to the category of time-based media art.

Departing from the notions introduced above and using a case-study approach, this chapter explores how the meanings of artworks are constructed, how artists sanction an artwork’s shape, how significant properties can be defined, and lastly how a tool for collaboration such as the artist interview can help to document these processes. Therefore, all three concepts are approached from the perspective of collaboration between the artist and the institution, and the artist interview serves both as a guiding theme and as a subject of study. Consequently, the main factor for choosing the case studies presented here is the instance of some form of this collaboration, with a preference for artist interviews that match the prerequisites of the definition proposed

---

110 Used also as ‘work-defining properties’, see: Laurenson, 2006, 2014. Laurenson explains that in the case of time-based media installations, work-defining properties may include “plans and specifications demarcating the parameters of possible change, display equipment, acoustic and aural properties, light levels, the way the public encounters the work and the means by which the time-based media element is played back” (Laurenson, 2006, para. 33).
in Chapter 1. It is important to remark that the descriptions of case studies provided throughout this book go into a level of detail that might seem unusual in a doctoral dissertation, but, as Irvin (2005) aptly notes in the opening quote of this chapter, these details are actually what makes an artwork what it is. All of these three notions allow us to understand ‘artwork’s identity’, where the concept of identity is understood in a similar way as in social anthropology, i.e. as the uniqueness and individuality which makes a person – or in this case an artwork – distinct from others (Szacki, n.d.). In line with the definition presented in Chapter 1, contemporary artworks, just like individuals, inevitably undergo changes during their lifetime. Still, they retain some features that determine what they are, and thus allow us to distinguish them from other artworks.

This chapter considers three early artworks by the Polish artist Mirosław Balka, each of which is now housed in a different institutional collection. Balka’s works were chosen as a subject of the study according to the six criteria set out in the introduction (see: p. 24), as well as due to the author’s familiarity with the artist’s practice and the fact that his work had already been examined from a conservation perspective in previous research projects. My own involvement with Balka’s work started early on through my personal fascination with contemporary art, and culminated with the artist interview I conducted in my capacity as conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which is the starting point for the first part of this chapter. The second case refers to the investigation carried out at the beginning of the 2000s within the framework of INCCA (see: Chapter 1, p. 46), which was used as a foundation for the research

111 Various complex contemporary artworks have prompted similarly detailed investigations by conservation scholars, e.g. Robyn Slogett on the work of Mike Parr (Slogett, 1998), Vivian van Saaze’s investigation of No Ghost Just a Shell by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe (van Saaze, 2009b, 2013a), or Hanna Hölling’s writings on Nam June Paik’s works, such as Arche Noah (Hölling, 2013, 2018).

112 The notion of artwork’s identity is used in this dissertation according to the definition provided in the Introduction (see: p. 15, footnote 10).
I conducted at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, described in the second subchapter. The third subchapter scrutinizes the collaboration between Balka and Tate when documenting and conserving one of his works, which Balka, in various interviews, described as an exemplary museum approach to his work.

Although the life and work of Miroslaw Balka are not the focus of this dissertation, the analysis of the data related to the discussed artworks requires a deep understanding of his artistic practice in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, the subsequent subchapters follow the ‘model’ of conservation-related research for the detailed study of artists’ biographies and their practices. The following section offers a brief introduction to Balka’s oeuvre and the recurrent motifs in his work, with an emphasis on those traits of his practice that comply with the defining elements of contemporary art presented earlier.

2.1.2 Balka’s Artistic Practice

Born in Warsaw in 1958, Miroslaw Balka is considered one of the most important European artists of his generation. He is known mainly for his minimalistic sculptures, installations, and videos referring to history, collective memory and World War II. One of the characteristic features of Balka’s oeuvre is the use of materials, such as soil, ashes, soap and salt, which are filled with powerful symbolic meanings: symbolic in a broader, cultural sense but also in a more intimate way linked to the artist’s personal

---

113 In 2001 Balka’s oeuvre was selected for a pilot study with the aim of connecting professionals from various institutions with the common goal of sharing knowledge about the attitude of contemporary artists towards the conservation of their works (Hummelen & Scholte, 2004). The project’s archive, which is partially available on the INCCA website, includes documentation of various interactions between Balka and museum professionals, from transcripts of interviews to testimonies of researchers involved in the endeavour. A detailed description of INCCA’s ‘Balka Pilot Project’ can be found on page 116 of this Chapter (see: footnote 144).

114 One of the key steps of The Decision-Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation and Presentation (Giebeler et al., 2019), the successor of the widely used and referenced Decision-Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art (1999) is ‘Data Generation’ and ‘Registration’. This stage entails collecting, generating and registering a variety of different data, including, among others, the acquisition history, bibliography, publications, correspondence, archival documents on the artwork, information on the artist, oral and written information from the artist, his/her assistants, confidants or contemporaries, such as artist interviews etc., and related artworks (Giebeler et al., 2019, p. 6).
experience. Of major importance for the reception of Bałka’s works is the context of his hometown Otwock. In the early 1990s, he transformed an old family house into his studio. Since then Bałka often refers in his work to the dimensions of this building and employs particular materials found in it – jute sacks, pine needles collected from Christmas trees, wooden and metal elements, linoleum, etc.\textsuperscript{115} These common materials are not only related to a formal reduction but also suggest a desire to communicate messages hidden in the essence of unused, ‘dead’ things (Sielewicz, 2009). A piece of old linoleum preserves the traces of those who have walked over it, the smell of old-fashioned soap evokes memories of school baths but also horrifying experiments carried out in WWII concentration camps (Czubak, 1998). As Bałka stated in one interview, “for me, the history of materials is more important than the history of art. [...] These are the materials I encounter in my studio, they constitute my personal landscape ... I choose them because they carry a history which I connect with when I touch them. It is like kissing the hand of history” (Blazwick, Lingwood, & Schlieker, 1990, p. 16).

Balka made his debut in 1985 with his graduation project, \textit{Remembrance of the First Holy Communion}. I would argue that this event is key to understanding and interpreting the strategies the artist employed during the following years of his career. The figurative sculpture, which resembles a self-portrait of the artist as a young boy, was designed to be part of a carefully planned artistic action. Professors assessing his work were taken to an abandoned house in a small village called Żuków, where they were invited to participate in a complex staged ritual of Bałka’s transformation into a mature member of the artistic community (Rottenberg, 1994; Sienkiewicz, 2015, para. 3). From a formal perspective, this project was performative in nature and the sculpture can be seen as both a remnant of the event and an autonomous artwork.

There are three important themes in Bałka’s early oeuvre: religion, performance and figurativism. Just after graduating, Balka created a series of figurative sculptures that refer to diverse stories and characters from Christian mythology.\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Black Pope},

\begin{itemize}
  \item For more information about the use of materials in Bałka’s work, see e.g. Jakubowicz, 2013; Sielewicz, 2009.
  \item Examples of sculptures created within this context are e.g. \textit{Kain} (1987), \textit{St. Adalbert} (1987), \textit{Angel of St. Adalbert} (1988) and \textit{John 15,6} (1989).
\end{itemize}
Black Sheep (1986), discussed in the next section, pertains to the artist’s youthful struggles with religion, which are key to the reading of his early pieces. Intertwined with his figurative works was his interest in performative practices, evident in Balka’s graduation project. In the second half of the 1980s, the artist was involved in the collective Neue Bieremiennost’, well-known in Warsaw’s art scene for organizing so-called ‘active openings’ — actions performed by members of the group engaging with the reality of the country towards the end of the communist period. The story of After-Easter Show (1986), a sculpture that resulted from one of these events and currently belongs to Tate, will be discussed in detail in the third section of this chapter. Balka’s focus on figures ended later in the decade. Future developments in his art practice were anticipated by a sculpture from 1987 entitled When you Wet the Bed (Czubak, 1998). In it, the human figure is not present but represented by objects — a bed, a prie-dieu and a T-shaped cross built out of a privy door with an Eye-of-Providence triangle replacing the traditional heart-shaped hole. Although Balka had created nonrepresentational works before, 1990 is acknowledged as the moment when he completely abandoned figurativism. The third artwork discussed in this chapter, \(211 \times 179 \times 125, 190 \times 129 \times 73\), commissioned in 1993, is rooted in this approach.

While from a formal standpoint many of Balka’s artworks are installations, he prefers to call them ‘sculptures’. The artist explains this choice in an interview conducted by art critic Rafal Jakubowicz, stating that although his pieces are strongly related to the notion of space, they are still just ‘sculptures in space’, not installations:

I’ve always thought [sic] that the difference between installation and sculpture is that sculpture is not something you throw away after the exhibition has closed. A sculpture has its life and its body. Even if it is just an electric cable - it is this specific electric cable and not any other. The majority of installation artists do not care for preserving their works. You can

---

A quote from the interview conducted in early 1990s illustrates this shift aptly: “In my early works, I used human body in a very literal way. [...] After a certain time, I fulfilled the hunger of human’s body form. I got interested in forms which accompany human body and traces that the body left: bed, coffin, urn.” (Jedliński, 1994, p. 64). 1990 also saw Balka’s participation in three exhibitions that shifted his international career: “Good God” in Dziekanka Gallery in Warsaw, Aperto’90 at the XLIV Venice Biennale, and “Possible Worlds: Sculpture from Europe” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Serpentine Gallery in London.
simply take the same materials and recreate the work, make it again. Then it’s an installation. Sculpture, for me, is a greater challenge because of the presence of the body. Another body that we create. Which is why I believe those [sic] to be sculpture. (Jakubowicz, 2007, p. 96)\textsuperscript{118}

\subsection{Balka’s (Im)materialities and Conservation-Related Challenges}

It is difficult to define any actual influence as I only recently had information about Beuys. But you could say my branch comes from the same tree. It’s a tree which does not forget about its roots, which can be more important than the branches. Beuys showed how important autobiography is for the artist. I feel the same.

(Balka on Beuys, Blazwick et al., 1990 quoted in Benezra, 1993, p. 23)

In terms of the chosen materials, Balka’s artistic practice is embedded in the Beuysian tradition. The parallel can be drawn not only because of the usage of similar raw ‘ingredients’ but also in terms of the sensibility of their application and the metaphorical language they embody. Today, the oldest collected artwork by Balka is only 30 years old and the artist is still active, and so anticipating future conservation issues may prove difficult. Therefore, a closer look at discussions on recent challenges related to the conservation of works by Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential artists of the previous generation, could help to foresee dilemmas that caretakers of Balka’s works might face in the decades to come. This section aims at giving the reader an example and a foretaste of complexities related to the conservation of contemporary art and the role of artists’ own assertions within this setting.

In their artistic practice, both Beuys and Balka developed a ‘dictionary of materials’ in which the definitions are in flux, slightly changing in relation to each particular context, but with a fixed set of personal and cultural associations behind them. One of Beuys’s favourite mediums is fat, which the artist employed as a metonym for the human body and metaphor for the human condition (Chametzky, 2010, p. 163). Moreover, the usage of fat is rooted in a widely known legend about the Tatar tribesmen who allegedly saved the artist’s life by covering his body in fat and felt after

\textsuperscript{118} Original spelling.
his plane crashed at the end of WWII (Tisdall, 1979, pp. 16–17). In Balka’s case, among the various materials I have already mentioned, one of the most significant is soap, which the artist has employed in various sculptures throughout his career.¹¹⁹ For him, personal associations are related to memories from his childhood, the experience of shame when as a pubescent teenager he had to take a bath in the kitchen away from the prying eyes of his relatives (Czubak, 1998).¹²⁰ Still, there are other connotations behind it too, associated with the Holocaust – the lack of soap and hygiene, baths as gas chambers, the supposed production of soap from human fat. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that for both Balka and Beuys, materials do not purport to be anything other than what they actually are – natural matter with all its physical characteristics. Another essential connection between the two artists is a performative aspect in their practices that influences their object-based pieces.

Challenges relating to the conservation of Beuys’s sculptures have been widely covered in the scholarly literature (Aben, 1995; Frasco, 2009; Grün, 2007). One of the best-known cases, which may serve as ‘inspiration’ for the caretakers of Balka’s artworks, is the story of Felt Suit (1970) from Tate’s collection.¹²¹ Felt was another material that carried a special meaning related to Beuys’s personal memories and family history. At the same time, the artist was fascinated by “its industrial, generic look and its stout utilitarianism” (Antonelli & Hoptman, 2000). In 1989, when the artwork was requested for display, conservators discovered that the object was infested with clothes moths and, as a letter to the museum’s director describes, “has been eaten away extensively” (Barker & Bracker, 2005, p. 2).¹²² Tate’s Conservation Department immediately started investigating possible restoration options. It turned out that it was

¹¹⁹  E.g. 2x(270x90x8), Ø 0,8x927, 101x41x12, 3x Ø 12 (1994) from Serralves Museum (iron, felt, soap, steel cable).


impossible to consolidate the damaged fabric since this kind of intervention would cause serious changes to its colour and texture (Barker & Bracker, 2005). According to Beuys, the characteristics of the fabric are crucial to understanding his works properly: “With the greyness of felt I produce anti-image. I evoke a world which is translucent and clear, maybe even transcendental, a very colourful world” (Tisdall, 1987 quoted in Barker & Bracker, 2005, p. 3). After a long debate between stakeholders, including the Tate Board of Trustees and Beuys’s widow, it was concluded that the artist would not permit the artwork to be displayed in its current state. Felt Suit was declared a ‘total loss’ and the institution initiated the procedure of de-accession. Remains of what used to be an artwork were removed from the Tate collection’s inventory and transferred to the museum archive.

What clearly differentiates Bałka and Beuys are their attitudes towards the preservation of their artistic production. Hiltrud Schinzel, the conservator most experienced with Beuys’s oeuvre, stated that only a careful reading of all the artist’s statements could lead to an understanding of his opinion on conservation, even though the conclusion would probably remain only speculative (Barker & Bracker, 2005, p. 1). Nonetheless, based on isolated comments one gets the impression that Beuys assumed that his art would not last forever. In one interview he mentioned that “all conservation is a form of self-comforting and self-deception, since all matter is destined to turn into dust” (Barker & Bracker, 2005, p. 4). What if it had been possible to document Beuys’s views on the conservation of Felt Suit when he was still alive? Would such an interview have facilitated the decision-making process described above? Taking into consideration Beuys’s sceptical attitude towards any effort to prolong the life of his works, and his often-expressed lack of interest in how museums take care of his work, probably not. In stark contrast, Bałka, as will be shown in the following paragraphs, has frequently stressed his concern for the future of his works and participated in their conservation. The next subchapters consider how this standpoint was embraced by the museums that collected his works and what it means from a conservation perspective.

2.2 **Black Pope, Black Sheep**

BAUMAN: And what is the purpose of this oddity?

BAŁKA: This is a space I was working on in the monastery Santo Domingo de Silos in Spain [...].

BAUMAN: Was it a basement?

BAŁKA: Yes.

BAUMAN: Was this Pope sitting there?

BAŁKA: This Pope was sitting there. I placed him in a difficult setting. One had to make a huge effort to reach it. Go down the steep stairs to the vestibule and then enter through a sculpture-wardrobe to the old refectory.

BAUMAN: And what is that goat?

BAŁKA: It’s not a goat. It’s a black sheep.

BAUMAN: But why black? Why not white?

BAŁKA: The black pope and the black sheep. [...] I took them to New York for the exhibition at the New Museum titled **Ostalgia**. The pope has a mission to accomplish. [...] To remind New Yorkers of the apocalypse. And of something else, that I haven’t thought of but maybe they will.

(Bauman, Bałka, & Bojarska, 2013, pp. 98–99)

2.2.1 **The Case of the Display Case**

Due to the aforementioned shift of focus in conservation from tangible to intangible – related, among other factors, to the emergence of new practices in contemporary art (see: Introduction, p. 15) – investigating the meanings of an artwork has become a significant task within the range of conservation-related practices. Professionals from the field are aware of the need to take different interpretations of an artwork into account when designing conservation strategies and to make an effort to collect available information that can facilitate that task (Marontate, 2013). Moreover, the importance of an artwork’s meanings for the conservation decision-making process was emphasised in various publications and resulted in the inclusion of this concept in *The Decision-Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and...*
Contemporary Art (1997). The discrepancy between ‘condition’ and ‘meaning’ serves there as a point of departure for designing conservation-related interventions. Although The Decision-Making Model persistently uses the singular ‘meaning’ as a reference, it acknowledges its layered and ambiguous character. It also claims that the authority to determine the meaning of an artwork for conservation purposes belongs to the “curator/conservator”. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate in this section, it is not only difficult to identify the potential meanings of a contemporary artwork, but also problematic to determine which of these meanings should be used as ‘the reference’. Moreover, ‘artwork’s meaning’ is not a stable concept – artworks take on meanings throughout their whole trajectory (van de Vall et al., 2011), and this process often results in a physical modification (alteration, adjustment) of the art object. Following this line of inquiry, this case study demonstrates the polysemy of contemporary artwork, how the meanings are shaped and how tools for collaboration such as the artist interview help
to identify them, and at the same time foster the rise of new ones. The case study draws on my experiences as a museum conservator experimenting with new approaches to developing a sustainable conservation strategy for contemporary works of art.

In spring 2013 the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN), where I was then working as a conservator, decided to acquire one of the few early works by Mirosław Bałka still available for sale. The sculpture, entitled Black Pope, Black Sheep (1986) was still owned by the artist and was, at the time, continuously travelling between exhibitions. Before the formal acquisition, the piece was to be shown in the Arsenale part of the Aperto exhibition at the upcoming Venice Art Biennale. However, as the sculpture was to be shipped from Italy directly to the museum storage, the institution was interested in monitoring the conditions of the loan and helping the artist with the logistics. The complexity of the situation and the conflicting interests of all parties involved are well reflected in the email correspondence between the museum’s Head of Collections, the curator of the show, and the artist.\(^{125}\)

Head of Collections to exhibition curator:

[...] I am writing on behalf of Mirosław with regards to the loan of the Black Pope to Biennale di Venezia. Since the work will enter our collection after the termination of the exhibition in Venice it has been recently transported by Mirosław to our premises in order to estimate its condition and help Mirosław to fill out the technical form. With regards to this I would be grateful if you could send us the humidity and temperature data for the Arsenale during May–November period.

Exhibition curator to Head of Collections:

[...] I am glad to know the piece will eventually enter the museum collection at the end of the presentation in Venice. As Mirosław Balka probably knows, the spaces of the Arsenale have no climate and temperature control. So

---

\(^{125}\) All three quotes come from the internal correspondence of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and are dated February 27, 2013. The excerpt of the email sent by the museum’s Head of Collections to Bałka was translated from Polish by the author. Emails retrieved from the personal archive of the author.
we don’t have data to give you or share about the climate conditions. [...] I hope we can move ahead with the loan as agreed. Please let me know if you want me to ask Mirosław’s opinion about this. I am sure you and the Museum [...] understand the importance of the inclusion of this piece in the biennale.

Head of Collections to Mirosław Bałka:

Dear Mirosław, I just received this email [...] about the climate conditions, or rather the lack of climate conditions, in the Arsenale. This reply confirms that the display case will be indispensable. Please let me know how we should proceed. The condition report will be ready by Friday.

In my role as conservator, I assumed, since the sculpture was still owned by Bałka and the museum was not directly involved in negotiating the conditions of the loan, that the display case mentioned in the last email was the requirement of the artist himself. Moreover, the choice of cheap materials – Plexiglas and MDF – susceptible to scratches and other kinds of damage, pointed to the temporary character of the protective device. Together with the artist we drew up precise instructions on how the work should be positioned inside the vitrine, and the artwork, together with the display case, was shipped to Italy.

At the end of 2013, months after the Venice show was over, Black Pope, Black Sheep was to be included in a temporary exhibition presenting recent MSN acquisitions.¹²⁶ To my surprise, the curator informed me that the sculpture would again be exhibited inside the Plexiglas display case. This was unusual because whereas it is normally the conservator – in this case me – who calls for extra protection of vulnerable objects, I myself found the vitrine unnecessary. Moreover, at MSN accessibility is highly valued and separating artworks from the audience with vitrines is a contested practice that usually elicits strong objections from the curatorial team. The vitrine for the Arsenale was originally produced by request of the artist, who was concerned about the security of the piece and possible damage caused by the Venetian humidity. From

a conservation perspective the first argument was not convincing even in the context of the Arsenale, as the display case was neither sealed nor climate-controlled. But even so, this motivation was less applicable still in the context of the new show in Warsaw. Furthermore, the institution was by then the artwork’s legal caretaker, and as such was entitled to decide how to protect it. As I eventually found out, presenting the sculpture in the vitrine during the show at MSN was actually the artist’s wish, and the institution decided to comply with his request. Nevertheless, the reason behind this demand remained unknown.

In 2015, MSN staff began to work on a new initiative – the Collection Documentation Programme. The aim of the project was to investigate, collect, and share details concerning the provenance, exhibition history, and past receptions of works from the museum’s collection. Interviews conducted with artists were to be a central aspect of the project. Due to the previous positive experiences of working with Mirosław Balka, his involvement in the museum, and his interest in the institutional life of his artworks, Black Pope, Black Sheep was chosen for a pilot study. This decision, besides complying with the objectives of the project, provided an opportunity to address the issue of the display case. Why did Balka decide to show the sculpture again in the vitrine? Is the sculpture now meant to be accompanied by the display case in all future exhibitions? And if so, should the museum consider the display case as an integral part of the sculpture and include it in the museum inventory as such?

This set of questions, addressing conservation problems, coincides with the research questions that guided the investigation presented in this subchapter. The study entailed three phases described in consecutive sections: the first one scrutinizes the history of the piece, the second one analyses the outcome of the artist interview, and the last one presents the analysis of the findings.

---

127 Mirosław Balka is a member of the Museum Board, see: http://artmuseum.pl/en/muzeum/rada.
2.2.2  Understanding the Artwork

Black Pope, Black Sheep is a sculpture consisting of two life-size figures — a pope, sitting on a chair hidden beneath his robes, and a sheep (Figure 7). The pope’s figure, as well as the mitre, was formed from scraps of a stiff carpet painted with bitumen paint and stitched together by hand. Its back is decorated with irregular, bicolour, geometrical ornamentation (Figure 8). Solid, longitudinal tusk-like elements made of metal rods resemble streams of tears falling from the figure’s eyes. There is a stiff structure in the form of the Greek letter \( \pi \) attached to the front of the sculpture. The large head tucked between narrow shoulders and the figure’s feet, which do not reach the ground, both shaped in a black textile, make the character look old, fragile and vulnerable, in contrast to his companion, the sheep, which is lively, energetic and sensual. The animal is formed with fabric that was stiffened with a thick layer of black bitumen paint mixed with fine sand. There are numerous U-shaped metal needles attached to its back giving it a bristled and aggressive look. Both of the figures’ mouths have a strong, scarlet colour and dominate within the mass of black, matte textile.

On the MSN collection’s website the artwork is described as follows:

Black Pope, Black Sheep is one of the most important pieces from the early stage of the artist’s career. [...] The artist has made a reference to the prophecies of Nostradamus, as well as to urban legends, visions, and apocalyptic predictions about the election of a Black Pope to the Holy See, which is to mark the end of the world. The work expresses the spirit of the latter half of the 1980’s: a time of anxiety, tensions, but also trust in the approaching breakthrough which was to shake the foundations of the world [...]. (“Mirosław Bałka: Black Pope, Black Sheep,” n.d., para. 1)

This short explanation, the first and most complete information that comes up when searching the Internet, became a starting point for identifying the artwork’s meanings and meaning-making factors, both inherent and external. Following the above-quoted description, the research started with the overview of the historical context of the artwork’s creation. The 1980s was indeed a unique period in Polish history. It witnessed the rise and fall of the Solidarity movement and the subsequent proclamation of martial law by the communist government – events that had a great
influence on the wider social mood and strongly affected the development of the artistic milieu. Artists started to pose questions about the place of art in the current context, its relation with the authorities and their moral responsibility in the face of political oppression (Jarecka, 2011). These concerns formed the basis for the birth of alternative artistic groups that were independent from state institutions and thus also from censorship. One of these groups developed around shows co-organized under the auspices of the Catholic Church, the main ally of the underground opposition. Exhibitions took place in parish buildings and mostly presented national-patriotic trends. The influence of this movement on the artistic life of the time was so important that it became a synonym for the art of the decade (Jarecka, 2011). However, besides the art scene authorised by the government and these ‘parish exhibitions’ there was also a third circle, the so-called ‘young art’ or New Expression. It was clustered around art schools and distanced itself from both the authorities and the Church. In this hopeless, suffocating atmosphere, without a clear vision of their future, young artists began to openly mock the state propaganda, the ‘official’ cultural world, the mass media, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and the hypocrisy of Polish morality (Woliński, n.d.). Bałka’s early works are strongly rooted in this context.

In most descriptions of Black Pope, Black Sheep the interpretation of the figure of the black pope relates to the Nostradamus prophecies. There are, however, other historical meanings related to the motif of the ‘black pope’ that are less present in the

128 The artistic phenomenon known as New Expression [Nowa ekspresja] evolved in Poland in the early 80s, during the birth of the Solidarity movement and the years of martial law, reached its peak between 1986 and 1987 and ended in 1989. In formal terms, it was equivalent to Neo-expressionism, which in Italy was called La Transavanguardia, in Germany Neue Wilde and in France Figuration Libre. See: Stanisławski K. [eds]. Apogeum - nowa ekspresja 1987, Toruń: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej “Znaki Czasu”, 2010.


However, the idea of there being a ‘black pope’ at the end of times first came from the Prophecy of the Popes attributed to St. Malachy – a series of 112 short, cryptic phrases in Latin which purport to predict the lineage of Roman Catholic popes (along with a few antipopes), beginning with Pope Celestine II. The alleged prophecies were first published by Benedictine monk Arnold Wion in 1595 and were attributed to Saint Malachy, a 12th-century Archbishop of Armagh, Ireland (Laineste & Brzozowska, 2014).
popular imagination. The term is also used in relation to the General of the Jesuits, due to the power connected to the position and his black vestments, contrasting with the white robes of the Pontiff. It is also a nickname for Anton LaVey, the legendary founder of the large US-based Church of Satan. Nevertheless, the key figure for understanding the social context in which Black Pope, Black Sheep was created is Karol Wojtyła, the ‘Polish Pope’. Since his election to the Holy See in 1978 until the fall of the Iron Curtain, he was the only common moral authority in Polish society, respected by both parties – people related to the regime and the opposition. There was unwritten social agreement that John Paul II was a person who should not be questioned or criticized. In this context, Balka’s sculpture portraying the Pope as weak, old and ‘mummified’ might be seen as controversial.

Throughout history representations of the enthroned pope have symbolized papal infallibility, one of the dogmas of the Catholic Church. In Renaissance and baroque tombs of popes their sculpted figures epitomise their power and glory. The best

---

example in painting is *Innocent X* by Velázquez, significant not only for being considered as the finest portrait ever created, but also for its later repercussions. From 1950 to 1963 Francis Bacon painted more than forty-five studies after the Velázquez painting in which he “divests the papal image of its power and authority” (Arya, 2009, p. 40). Both Bacon and Bałka entered in a dialogue with the tradition of immortalizing and eternalizing the figure of the pontiff. Both interpretations are located within the context of death, although in the case of Bacon’s first and best-known portrait from the series death is represented in a sudden, explosive event manifested as a scream, while Bałka’s pope is a silent witness to death, mummified by the passage of time. Popes’ mummified bodies are a reality in the Catholic tradition, where the incorruptibility of a mortal body is a sign of its holiness. In Roman churches corpses of popes are publicly displayed for the purpose of adoration and prayer. Within the framework of the Christian tradition, Bałka’s pope likewise alludes to the archetype of the Good Shepherd, a title of Christ and the model for a bishop’s pastoral office.¹³¹ His flock consists of just one animal, which is as black as the shepherd himself. In European

culture, a black sheep typically alludes to a member of a group who stands out, rooted in the belief that black sheep were less valuable than white ones because it was more difficult to dye their wool.\textsuperscript{132}

The investigation of changing interpretations of the artwork throughout consecutive exhibitions demonstrates that it is not just the sculpture itself that generates meaning, but that it can acquire new ones through the context of its display. In 2010, after almost 20 years of storage in a cubbyhole in Balka’s workshop, \textit{Black Pope, Black Sheep} was presented in a solo show of the artist’s work organized by the Reina Sofia Museum at the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos, in the middle of rural Castile, Spain.\textsuperscript{133} For the purpose of this show, Balka re-contextualised the sculpture by making it a part of a larger narrative, built around the notion of a rite of passage. To access the exhibition visitors had to descend to the Abbey cellar, and the entrance to the main gallery was

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{133} The exhibition, organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (MNCARS) and curated by Lynne Cooke, was entitled \textit{ctrl} (November 2010 - April 2011). For more details about the show, see: https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/miroslaw-balka-ctrl
\end{flushleft}
blocked by the rear of a huge wardrobe. In front of it, at eye level, there was a triangular handle hanging from the ceiling, clearly meant to be a device that grants access to the exhibit beyond. After pushing one of the wardrobe’s doors visitors found themselves in a dark barrel-vaulted chamber. At the far end, emerging from the darkness and accentuated by spotlighting, appeared the sculpture atop a low grey pedestal, as if suspended in the air (Figure 9-10). In the context of the dimly lit stone vault it looked like it had always been a part of this dramatic setting. Another level of meaning is added by the title of the exhibition – the abbreviation ‘ctrl’, as it appears on a computer keyboard. In the context of the narrative presented in the Abbey, one could think about the control of the common historical memory and individual experiences on the perception of things. Or the control of the artist over the public’s feeling or emotions. Clearly, the historical context of the sculpture’s creation was less important in this setting, as meanings related to death and the ‘dark mysteries’ of Christianity gained priority.

---

134 For Bałka, the wardrobe entrance alluded to the furniture used by Anne Frank’s family as a hiding place in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam during World War II. The description of the exhibition, and ideas on possible interpretations, are based on the catalogue text (see: Cooke, 2011).
In the next major exhibition, entitled Ostalgia, held at the New Museum in New York, the contextualization of the sculpture was entirely different. Black Pope, Black Sheep was presented there alongside other artworks from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics in the context of their dialogue with the former political system. As the press note on the museum website indicates, the exhibition title referred to the German word ‘ostalgie’, “a term that emerged in the 1990s to describe a sense of longing and nostalgia for the era before the collapse of the Communist Bloc” (New Museum, 2011, p. 1). This time, the historical context of the artwork’s creation was foregrounded, positioning the artwork squarely within the exhibition’s narrative. Interestingly, in the press release the complex background of the artwork’s creation was reduced to the short description, “uncanny reinterpretation of religious sculpture” (New Museum, 2011, p. 1).

The next exhibition was the Aperto of the 55th Venice Biennale, for which the display case was designed. Bałka’s sculpture was a part of the show entitled The Encyclopedic Palace within the section curated by artist Cindy Sherman, who created her own imaginary museum, a kind of “anatomical theatre in which to contemplate the role of images in the representation and perception of the self” (Gioni, 2013). It contained a collection of representations of bodies and faces where ethnographical objects, votive offerings, puppets, and dolls were shown together with sculptures, photographs and paintings. Black Pope, Black Sheep, ‘museologized’ by the vitrine (Figure 11), fit perfectly within the general aesthetics of the show, full of odd figures shielded behind protective glass.

As can be seen, already at this stage of the preliminary research the task to “determine the meaning of the work” following the guidelines established in The Decision-Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art (1997) had turned out to be a complex undertaking. Still, I assumed that a comparison between the gathered information and the artist’s own view might point in the ‘right’ direction and help to establish a reference for future conservation decision making, in this particular case for determining if the display case should become an integral part of the piece.

2.2.3 The Artist’s Voice: Memories and meanings in flux

The artist interview, designed in close collaboration with the MSN assistant collections curator, was conducted by the author in the presence of the sculpture and was recorded on video. The questions’ point of departure was the information collected during the preliminary research. The conversation lasted more than two hours and resulted in a trove of valuable information. Following the conservation problem as defined before, this section will present the analysis of portions of this conversation that add to the understanding of the role of the display case in the sculpture’s story, and provide more contextual information that can influence the decision-making process regarding the artwork’s possible futures.

The conversation addressed the issue of the display case directly:

AW: We met on the occasion of preparations for exhibiting the sculpture at the Venice Biennale. Due to the specificity of the Arsenale venue – potential risks related to the unstable microclimate and the crowd of visitors – you decided back then to protect the Black Pope, Black Sheep with a display case. Since then, the sculpture has been accompanied by the vitrine at each subsequent exhibition. Why?

MB: When this work was created, in 1987, it did not contain any additional element. The question about a possible addition of a small pedestal came up during the exhibition in the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos. Back then I thought that a new historical perspective emerged and that the pedestal would distance the viewers from the piece [AW: in terms of historical distance]. The sculpture was presented on a similar pedestal in the New Museum. On the occasion of the Venice show, there arose a necessity for additional protection of the piece. However, besides solving practical problems related to the security of the work, the display case added new layers of meanings. It opened a drawer full of popes in glass vitrines displayed in Italian churches. It triggered memories related to the ‘popemobile’ in which John Paul II used to travel during his Pastoral Visits. I think that since then the display case became a part of the piece naturally. In this context, the pope seems to be more ‘mummified’. I accepted the
display case artistically and I can’t imagine displaying the sculpture without protection. [...] The only thing I would change is to replace Plexiglas with glass, which is a more noble material.

AW: What about the pedestal? [...] Do you think that its colour should always remain the same, or rather adapted to the architecture of each particular show?

MB: The colour had already been chosen. However now, when there is more time to think, I would consider remaking the pedestal from evenly cast, grey concrete while keeping the same measurements [...]. The Black Pope relates to stable sculptures, stable vitrines. Yet, there are other types of [AW: pope] sculptures, for instance, processional sculptures from Holy Week, Semana Santa in Spain. Sculptures with a religious character, which are built lighter on purpose so that they can travel along the streets of Spanish cities. But in this case, I think, the grey concrete pedestal and the glass vitrine would be the right thing to do. (M. Bałka, in-person interview, July 27, 2015)

The quote presented above shows that Bałka is not only aware of the changeability of his work but is also interested in creatively exploring its potential. The story of the display case and the development of possible meanings it implies is presented here in a linear way. The first phrase suggests that the sculpture was designed to stand directly on the floor, and meant to be perceived by the viewers as a part of the ‘reality’ in which they themselves function. In the Spanish show, the artist wanted to create a distance from the meanings that the piece had previously expressed, which he achieved by adding the pedestal. That, together with the entire presentation setting, changed the relationship between the public and the piece: the figures seemed to pertain to another reality – whether historical or created by the artist. The addition of the display case followed the same logic – the sculpture in the vitrine is immediately perceived as something not only distant in terms of time and space but also as something significant and valuable, something to be treasured.

This linear narrative was challenged by a photograph found during additional research carried out for the purpose of this book several months after the interview. It was taken during the very first presentation of Black Pope, Black Sheep, a year after the artwork’s
The image was taken from behind the sculpture and shows the pope and the sheep placed on whitewashed wooden boards that might resemble platforms used for carrying figures of saints during religious processions (Figure 13). The artist seems to have forgotten this additional element and did not mention it during the interview. Evidently, twenty years later, for the purpose of the Spanish show Balka re-interpreted the sculpture in line with his more recent concerns.\footnote{137}

Although the excerpt from the interview suggests that for Balka the artist’s role in assigning meanings to the artwork is of minor importance, he often actively suggests interpretative paths for his sculptures. In the interview, by using the passive voice and referring to the display case as a subject instead of an object, Balka seems to distance himself from the process of meaning making. The pedestal and the display case, both added on his request, generated meanings and his role was only to accept them ‘artistically’. At the same time, Balka seems interested in building and controlling narratives around his works. While studying the curatorial interpretations of the sculpture I searched for the first mention of the Nostradamus prophecy as a key to the reading of the work. Finally, it turned out to have been

\footnote{136}{The exhibition \textit{And now it’s time for sculpture} [\textit{A teraz rzeźba}], curated by Andrzej Bonarski, was held in the Polish Architects Association’s [SARP] pavilion in Foksal street in Warsaw in 1988. The photograph was found in the archive of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.}

\footnote{137}{After the discovery I showed the photograph to Balka. He acknowledged that this image jogged his memory, and recalled that the boards, originally used for shuttering, were not whitewashed but covered by leftover mortar. He also mentioned that the boards were used later as a part of \textit{Oasis} (C.D.F.) (1989), currently in the collection of Tate. Balka, M. (October 19, 2016). [Email to Agnieszka Wielocha]. Author’s private archive.}
the artist’s own hint. Another example of Balka influencing the meaning-making processes is a story recounted in an article by art critic Karol Sienkiewicz (2013), which describes the circumstances surrounding the production of the catalogue for *How it is*, Balka’s celebrated exhibition in Tate’s Turbine Hall. According to Sienkiewicz, the contributing authors received from the artist beforehand a handwritten list of cultural associations related to the project. The entries included diverse concepts ranging from the artist’s own basement to Noah’s Ark, Jonah inside the whale, or even a black dildo (Sienkiewicz, 2013).

As the section describing the outcomes of the preliminary research demonstrates, there is another group of meanings that are generated without the artist’s direct involvement and beyond his control, and which are dependent on the ever-changing social, historical and cultural context. However, the shift in the emphasis on different groups of meanings may be triggered by new interrelations caused by the changes as such. Balka incorporated the display case as a part of the sculpture to distance the public and himself from his early work, but also to communicate that the story told by the artwork belongs to the past. This gesture activated new possible associations and, in consequence, interpretations. For instance, the appearance of the display case strengthens the symbolic dialogue of Balka’s sculpture with the aforementioned paintings by Bacon. One of the British artist’s first ‘pope-paintings’, entitled Head IV, is at the same time the first one to include the characteristic motif of a spatial, cubic structure. In the literature it has been referred to as a ‘space-frame’, ‘glass box’ or ‘cage-like structure’. Interestingly, Bacon repeatedly denied that this motif had any particular meaning, and stated that the rectangular structure helped him to frame and “really see the image – for no other reason” (Sylvester, 2000, p. 37). Regardless of the artist’s intentions, the motif is a powerful visual link between Balka’s pope and Bacon’s papal portraits. Is this interpretative trace less valid than those offered by the artist himself? Not necessarily, as Balka often empowers spectators to make sense of

---


139 The list was published later on in the same catalogue. See: Balka, M., Sainsbury, H., Tate Modern, & Exhibition. (2009). *Miroslaw Balka: How it is; [on the occasion of the exhibition at Tate Modern, London 13 October 2009-5 April 2010]*. London: Tate Publ.

140 Art historians interpreted the transparent construction as an influence of Giacometti’s spatial sculptures, which employed a similar solution.
his artworks in their own way – in the quote opening this subchapter he states that the Black Pope’s ‘mission’ for the New York show was to remind New Yorkers of something that he hadn’t thought of but that maybe they would (Bauman et al., 2013).

2.2.4 The Polysemy of an Artwork, the Categories of Meanings.

Drawing on the example of Bałka’s early work, I have shown how a contemporary artwork continues to take on meanings throughout its whole career, and how this process can result in or be a consequence of a physical modification of the art object. Instead of one singular multi-layered meaning there are multiple, changeable, internal and external features that generate meanings by triggering associations with certain concepts, ideas and events. This process is conditioned by multifarious, often casual circumstances – for instance, my association of the whitewashed boards on which the sculpture was placed during the first exhibition with processional sculptures was elicited unintentionally by the artist himself. Moreover, as the story of the photograph from the first exhibition shows, due to artworks’ changeability some of the meaning-making features disappear with time and their associated meanings fall into oblivion. Following this line of thought, the selection of one single meaning as a reference for conservation decisions to be made by the artwork’s keeper might be seen as an authoritarian gesture of fixing the artwork in its ‘preferred state’ against its inherent changeability.

All of the imaginable associations that might potentially generate meanings are impossible to grasp and therefore the collection of meanings related to an artwork is an open-ended, infinite set. Furthermore, none of the artwork’s manifestations described above aimed to present all the meanings, even those recognized at that time. As the display of an artwork is always a gesture of selection, Black Pope, Black Sheep has never been shown as a whole, but as one of many possible interpretations. However, while a display is a temporary condition of the artwork, conservation refers to an artwork as a whole. Therefore, the conservation decision making needs to build on as many meanings as rationally possible, while acknowledging the fragmentary character of the set.

See: the excerpt of the interview with Bałka, p. 81.
Particular moments in the artwork’s trajectory generate features that can trigger new interpretations and/or fix previous ones. In *Black Pope, Black Sheep* these moments are, for instance, the creation of the sculpture and its first exhibition, the Spanish show in which the artwork was reinterpreted as part of an autonomous narrative, the ‘mummification’ suggested by the addition of the display case, and, last but not least, the artist interview conducted as a result of the process of the piece’s musealisation. During the conversation Bala not only explains the way the display case became part of the work, but also goes through the development of the process. I would argue that the last step of this development actually took place during the interview when Bala thought of remaking the display case with more ‘noble’ materials. Thus, the artist interview allows for identifying meanings and reconstructing the story and circumstances of its creation, but also provides a space for the continuation of the creative process. The meanings might be ‘forged’ during the conversation: for instance, the meanings of the display case, pre-shaped during the events of the preceding months, were actually ‘fixed’ by the artist during the interview. The interview, both as a process and as an encounter, also triggers new associations that can easily result in meaning making, such as the relation between *Black Pope, Black Sheep* and Bacon’s papal paintings, or the whitewashed boards and the uncanny figures of saints from the Spanish processions.

Now we may return to the question that has guided this part of the investigation: whether from now on the display case should be considered a part of the sculpture. Despite the fact that, rather than answering this question directly, what the interview provides is the artist’s preferences, for now the answer is affirmative. The display case, together with all the associated meanings, became a significant feature in need of preservation and the artist clearly sanctioned it as such. This affirmation triggers further questions addressing the right approach to the ‘new’ element from the practical standpoint of the museum’s procedures. If the display case is part of the artwork, can it actually be remade from more ‘noble’ materials as the artist suggested? During the interview Bala clearly stated that he would not accept reproducing or making display copies of the figures, and the significance of the particular materials is broadly acknowledged as Bala’s trademark. At the same time, he proposes to fabricate a ‘new’ version of the display case. Is the display case, then, a part of the artwork governed by other rules than the rest of its elements? When remade from more ‘noble’ materials, will it take on the same status as the pope and the sheep? In terms of museum practices,
the answers to these queries result in practical, everyday decisions. In the case of a loan request, would it be possible to ship only the figures, and avoid the expensive transport of the heavy and fragile glass vitrine by having a copy produced on site? There are no general rules that can provide answers to these questions, and they can only be addressed through common-sense thinking and, while still available, a continuous dialogue with the artist. Finally, does the artwork always need to be displayed with this new addition? Regardless of what the artist has expressed in the interview, I argue that it is not necessary. Following the assumption that all instances of display entail selection and are thus mere interpretations of the artwork, there is no need to exhibit all the meanings or all the physical elements of the piece. In my view, the setting in which the work was displayed in the Spanish monastery continues to be an equally valid sanction and, as such, could be recreated for the purpose of another display. Pursuing this line of thought, the way the sculpture was presented at first – on the whitewashed wooden platform – still remains a possible option for future installations, especially in the framework of exhibitions exploring historical narratives.

This case study reaffirms the artist interview as a useful method of research and documentation. Besides gathering facts, it makes it possible to collect stories that provide hints for conservation-related decision making. It also proves that the information obtained from the interview needs to be completed by and juxtaposed with data from other sources, and the interpretation of these interrelations is what should guide the choices related to the future shape of the artwork. Therefore, the informed decision on the way Black Pope, Black Sheep might be displayed in the future shall be made on the basis of interrelations between stories selected from this set, while also considering the remaining ones. For instance, the combination of the whitewashed platform with the display case is not one of the options to choose from, as the information in the set clearly indicates that those two elements were never shown together. This implies that the artist interview needs to be used within the constellation of other stories gathered by different means, an issue that will be explored in detail in the following section.

This does not apply to the sculpture itself, as from the outset it was created as an assemblage of two figures, and therefore these are not to be separated.
Two issues stood out for me that day, that indeed have been problematic ever since the formation of INCCA. Firstly, the 'formal' artist interview that is carefully prepared, often filmed and of which a transcript is made is not always the most significant or helpful document for making conservation decisions. Informal interactions with the artist and the ideas he/she discloses during the installation of a work, for example, can provide information 'gems' for the future. The challenge remains how to capture such interactions and archive this information in such a way it can be helpful in the future. Secondly, despite great improvements in information technology in the last decade, it still remains a challenge to ensure that even your direct colleagues have access to your documentation; let alone international peers and the public. (te Brake-Baldock, 2014, para. 1)

2.3.1 **Reporting Conversation, Documenting Collaboration**

Contrary to the rather imprecise and contested notion of artist intent, the artist’s sanctions are concrete acts and communications through which she or he stipulates the artwork’s meaning-making features (Irvin, 2005). This includes the way artists install their artworks when put on display, their alteration of art objects, as well as all of their statements – oral and written – related to a particular piece. Following Irvin’s words, “if being true to the work is something that matters to us” artist sanctions need to be taken into consideration both for the reading of the work as well as for the management of its possible future shapes (Irvin, 2005, p. 325). However, as contemporary artworks are inherently changeable, artists often modify their sanctions and the latest sanctions might even contradict those imposed in the past. Based on the assumption that the best way to identify, understand and collect artists’ sanctions is through collaboration with artists, this section looks at the means through which artists sanction their artworks, how sanctions might evolve in time, how they are documented in the museum setting, and how they might be used in conservation decision making.\(^{143}\)

\(^{143}\) A more detailed account of the story has been published in Wielocha, A. (2017). El registro de los vínculos entre el museo y el artista y su impacto en el ámbito de la conservación y restauración. In **Conservación de Arte Contemporáneo. 18a Jornada** (pp. 95–104). Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
The starting point of this investigation is the report by Andrée van de Kerckhove, a former conservator at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo (hereinafter referred to as KMM), considering a collaboration between the museum and Mirosław Bałka on challenges related to the care and display of the work entitled 211x179x125, 190x129x73 (1993) acquired by the institution in 1993 (van de Kerckhove, 2000).

The report was inspired by and written for one of INCCA’s early initiatives, the so-called ‘Bałka Pilot Project’. Between 2000 and 2002, various INCCA members and partner institutions got involved in diverse activities related to Bałka’s oeuvre, from organising exhibitions to acquiring artworks (Hummelen & Scholte, 2004). This was a perfect occasion to embark on a project dedicated to testing the capabilities and limitations of an online database as a platform to share and exchange information collected from artists with other conservation professionals (Hummelen & Scholte, 2006). The idea behind the ‘Bałka Pilot Project’ was to plant the seed of the conservation-oriented ‘artist’s archive’ by collecting information obtained from the artist by various network members in different contexts. The objective was to establish a source compiling an inventory of important conservation issues related to the work of the Polish sculptor. Consequently, this ‘catalogue’ was meant to help in choosing the suitable documentation method for artworks from Bałka’s oeuvre and inspire questions to pose during artist interviews (Hummelen & Scholte, 2006). The result was a set of documents: descriptions of artworks, interview transcripts, reports from joint work with the artist, installation instructions and drawings, photographs, and notes from discussions between members of the network. The archive of INCCA’s ‘Bałka Pilot Project’ is to this day an exceptional documentation of the collaboration between an artist and various museum professionals affiliated with different institutions.

Figure 14. Mirosław Bałka, 211x179x125, 190x129x73 at Sonsbeek 93. Installation view of primary location of the concrete element near Moscowa cemetery in Arnhem. Source: KMM Archive. Photographer: unknown.
The main purpose of the text was to document the conversation between Kerckhove and Balka that took place on the occasion of the artist’s visit to the museum. Although the conservator reports events taking place seven years after the acquisition, she constantly refers back to facts from the past as recorded in the documents held in the museum archive. Quoted and paraphrased fragments of the conversation intertwine with the results of archival research and Kerckhove’s personal opinions and reflections. Even though the report does not meet the requirements of the artist interview, it provides what interview transcripts usually do not offer – remarkable insights into the process of collaboration as such. The report is written in the form of a research diary that covers ten days dedicated to researching the piece and starts one day after Balka’s visit to the KMM. The text ends with a short summary listing the characteristics of the discussed artwork that Kerckhove considered important from a conservation perspective. The appendix consists of a catalogue of actions to be performed as a consequence of both Kerckhove’s research and the artist’s visit, and a short undated note entitled Latest News. As the final note states, the report was read and approved by the artist. My
own research, conducted in 2016, was prompted by learning that after more than 20 years 211x179x125, 190x129x73 would be disassembled from the permanent display and moved to the museum storage. As such events are usually significant moments in an artwork’s career provoking questions concerning its future, my study sought to follow real, practical problems approached from the perspective of institutional practices.

211x179x125, 190x129x73 was originally created as a contribution to the Sonsbeek 93 sculpture exhibition in Arnhem and consists of two parts.146 The first one is a concrete cuboid construction sunken into the ground, recalling a double grave (Figure 14-15). On one of its walls, two concrete seats are mounted that stick out above ground level. The second element is a negative of the inner space of the first one, made of Corten steel and filled with soil (Figure 16). Its top is partially covered by a piece of white textile with a heating device hidden underneath, set to the temperature of 36,6°C. The size of each element of the sculpture is of great importance, firstly because it is referred to in the title of the work and, secondly, because it alludes to the measurements of...
Bałka’s own body. In Arnhem, the two elements of the work were installed in different locations: while the concrete cuboid was shown outside the local cemetery fence, the steel container was placed in an abandoned house in the red-light district of the city. After the end of the show the piece was acquired by KMM, where the concrete element was installed outdoors, in the corner of the front garden close to the junction between two museum buildings – the old and the new one (Figure 17 -18), while the steel cuboid was placed nearby but inside the museum gallery (Figure 19). In this case to Bałka’s height, which is 190 cm; see: Maria Morzuch and Miroslaw Bałka, ‘Interview’, in Muzeum w Łodzi 1931–1992: Collection-Documentation-Actualité, exhibition catalogue, Musée d’Art Contemporain, Lyon 1992, p. 262

Van de Kerckhove (2000, p. 4) describes the placement of the sculpture in the museum as follows: “Miroslaw chose a new location for the work at the point where the Van de Velde Building adjoins the newer section which provided the first large sculpture hall and which formed the transition to the museum’s new wing. Both the concrete element, placed outdoors, and the steel elements, inside the building, are located in relatively secluded corner positions in and just outside this transitional zone. Miroslaw chose a place for the concrete component next to the first large window of the old sculpture hall. It is noteworthy that here too he chose a place ‘just outside the boundary’. The component is in the museum’s front garden, effectively ‘outside’ the museum. It is hardly visible to the visitors entering the museum because it is located some distance from the path behind a corner of the building”.

---

119

Figure 17. Mirosław Bałka, 211x179x125, 190x129x73. Concrete element on the permanent display at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo. Source: KMM Archive. Photographer: unknown.
Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to see the piece on display. Upon my arrival in Otterlo, I learned that the concrete element had been partially disassembled only a couple of days earlier, while the steel one had been moved from the gallery to offsite storage months earlier due to its unfortunate location. After the relocation of the piece from Arnhem, the steel element was placed in the busy entrance to the exhibition space, where it was interfering in the spatial design of temporary shows and misleading the public. Moreover, as there was no direct visual connection between the elements of the sculpture, it was difficult for visitors to read these two objects as one piece. The removal from display triggered questions related to the artwork’s future. The former location was not a suitable one, both for the artwork’s legibility and the management of the museum space. Would it be possible in the future to reinstall the elements of the work in a different place within the museum grounds without putting the artwork’s identity at risk? If so, what criteria should be applied when choosing the new setting? Should the elements removed from the exhibition be stored and reinstalled in the new location, or could they be reconstructed according to a precise documentation made beforehand? These questions, hypothetical but at the same time rooted in the real events, were formulated specifically for the purpose of this research as a method for examining possible sources of an artist’s sanctions and their application in conservation-related decision making.

S. Kensche, in-person interview, September 26, 2016.
2.3.2 Sanctionable Features: Relocating the site-specific

This section presents the history of 211x179x125, 190x129x73, identifies its potential meanings, and demonstrates how these were affected by the initial relocation of the piece to the museum grounds. As mentioned, Bałka usually does not explain his concepts directly, but rather provides associations considered as potential starting points for interpretation. In this case, some of these meaning-making leads are rooted in events that took place before the actual work was created, and only the recollection of those circumstances allows one to grasp how the artwork took shape. These episodes can be traced through the letters exchanged between Valerie Smith, the curator of the Sonsbeek 93 show and the artist, published in the exhibition’s catalogue. Each of the above excerpts offers insights into the work in progress and demonstrates how the creative process unfolded through conversations.

Spent the day with Miroslaw Balka. We had a little lunch in his home in Otwock, saw a pheasant out of the window, then went to the house of his grandparents, which he proudly bought last summer. Five rooms, the linoleum floor worn in the places where habits were formed. The humbleness and the sanctity of the place are present in Miroslaw’s work. It occurred to him one day that this is what his work had to be about. He took me to the Jewish graveyard in Otwock [...]. Then we went to the
Christian cemetery to visit the graves of his grandfather and grandmother on both sides. […] We went to his grandparents’ house and he showed me his work. (V. Smith, Brand, & Muynck, 1993, pp. 22–23)

[…] I just read and looked at your revised proposals and I still love them both … of course I liked the original concept of the house upside down, but I think that the visitors will get the feeling of ‘house’ when they see the stone plate in a room in a house that they have to walk into. The idea of ‘house’ or ‘home’ will be reinforced then. Yet, on the other hand putting the plate of white terrazzo in the red-light district gives it another connotation altogether. (V. Smith et al., 1993, p. 58.

Quoted fragments, selected as a catalogue description for Balka’s contribution to Sonsbeek 93, indicate that two motifs – a home and a tomb – were present in the artist’s thinking from the very beginning of the project.¹⁵⁰ These are also visible in preparatory sketches, where one can observe that what finally became a grave developed from the idea of a cast of a house placed upside-down in the ground (Figure 20-21). Both tomb and home are significant themes in Balka’s life and oeuvre – his grandfather made tombstones for a living and his father engraved them – while home – the artist’s family house in Otwock – is a point of reference for many of Balka’s works (see: p. 91). In the primary location of the piece in the vicinity of the Arnhem cemetery, the concrete component of 211x179x125, 190x129x73 would be immediately understood as a grave-like construction. The two elements of the piece are connected not only by the fact that the steel element is a negative of the concrete one, but also in that the soil that fills the first must be taken out from the spot in which the latter is placed.¹⁵¹

The note on one of the artist’s preparatory sketches for 211x179x125, 190x129x73 suggests that the artwork was created specifically for particular sites in Arnhem, and at the outset translocation was not considered (Figure 22). It states that after the end

¹⁵⁰ One of the focuses of Sonsbeek 93 was the notion of ‘process’ – many of the commissioned works were more about the process of creation or reception than the finished product. The catalogue reflected this idea, as instead of showing the pictures of the artworks, it presents the process of collaboration between Smith and the artists. See: Smith et al., 1993.

¹⁵¹ Interestingly, the connection between both pieces, obscured by their translocation, was not evident either during the Arnhem show. In the essay written on the occasion of Balka’s exhibition in Valencia, while recalling the artist’s contribution for Sonsbeek 93 art critic Juan Vincente Aliaga speaks about the two elements as separate artworks (Aliaga, 1997, p. 141).
Figure 20. Miroslaw Balka, One of preparatory sketches for 211x179x125, 190x129x73. Source: Smith, V., Brand, J., & Muynck, C. de (Eds.). (1993). Sonsbeek. Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, p. 57. The original drawing belongs to KMM collection (inventory number: KM 106.484).
of the exhibition “what will stay it will be two small chairs waiting behind the fence of the cemetery” (Foksal Gallery Foundation. (1993, March 23). [Fax]. KMM Archive, Otterlo, p. 3/4).

The story of relocating and shaping the final look of the piece together with the artist on the museum grounds can be reconstructed on the basis of Kerckhove’s report and the documents kept in the museum archive. The process of dismantling, transporting and re-installing the piece after the end of Sonsbeek 93 was personally supervised by Evert van Straaten, then director of KMM. According to his notes, the new location of both pieces on the museum grounds was meticulously marked in situ by the artist (Bloemheuvel & Kooten, 2007, p. 156). Kerckhove confirms this fact in her report by stating that Bałka “specified the placing in the Kröller-Müller Museum precisely (although no drawings were made)” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 3). The catalogue of the KMM collection states that “Balka used the purchase of the artwork as an opportunity to improve his work in the sense of giving it a more universal meaning, now that it was separated from the social context of Arnhem and its direct relationship with the cemetery” (Bloemheuvel & Kooten, 2007, p. 156). However,
a careful comparison of photographs from both sites might lead to the conclusion that by translocating the work something important was lost, while the acquired ‘universal meaning’ was not easily perceptible. In the museum’s garden the ‘tombness’ of the outdoor sculpture was no longer as clear as it had been in the vicinity of the cemetery. As the report informs us, when Kerckhove asked the artist about the link between the initial setting, the new one and the reading of the piece, Bałka responded that “in a certain way, a museum is also a kind of cemetery” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 5). Careful analysis of the visual records of both displays leads to the conclusion that there are few clear parallels between the arrangement of the two elements in their initial and final settings. For instance, while in Arnhem the seats from the outdoor part faced away from the cemetery fence, in KMM they were facing the museum wall. There are also significant differences between how the indoor steel part was positioned in both locations. In Arnhem, the distance between the walls and the box was substantial – it was possible to access the piece from all sides – while in KMM’s gallery it was placed literally in the corner of the room.

The Museum archive holds another note by van Straaten for the technicians responsible for the translocation, in which the director specifies elements that need to be moved from Arnhem: “The museum takes only: the concrete sculpture, the

Figure 22. Mirosław Bałka, One of preparatory sketches for 211x179x125, 190x129x73 with instructions for the production of the piece and a note about the location of the concrete piece in relation to the cemetery fence. Sent by fax from Foksal Gallery Foundation on 23rd of March 1993. Source: KMM archive.
empty metal container the heating element and the flannel blanket” (Bloemheuvel & Kooten, 2007, p. 156). Nevertheless, Kerckhove states clearly that the only original component that was actually kept was the concrete one. Although there is no detailed documentation on the state in which the latter reached the museum, Kerckhove notes that there were numerous repairs made at the time of translocation, which became visible after the structure was cleaned by museum staff at the end of 2000 (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 9). The steel box turned out not to be strong enough to be reused, as the metal sheets where too thin and the welds had begun to crack under the weight of the filling soil. The museum team ultimately decided to reconstruct it, carefully following the original dimensions. The new version varies from the original in that, while the metal surface of the box made for the abandoned house in Arnhem’s red-light district was only partially covered by the products of corrosion (Figure 16), the new one was made with weathering steel known under the trademark Corten, which develops a unified protective layer of rust (Figure 19). According to Kerckhove, these changes were consulted with and approved by the artist.  

The story of the third element – the white textile with the heating system – is even more complicated. The one from the first manifestation could not be reused for the second one due to the objections of the museum technical department, who assessed the electric system as hazardous (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 5). The ‘blanket’ is

---

152 “Both the museum’s technical department and the artist confirmed that the steel sheeting was too thin and that the welds were breaking under the pressure of the box’s contents. The box was therefore reconstructed. The new embodiment was made of 5mm Corten steel sheeting. The dimensions given in the title of the work (which correspond to those in drawings made for the Sonsbeek exhibition) were applied, so that the general size and proportions are identical. The artist ‘revised’ the work” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 5).

153 This book follows the glossary of key terms in contemporary art conservation included in the most recent version of The Decision-Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation and Presentation (Giebeler et al., 2019), which defines an artwork’s ‘manifestation’ as follows: “Manifestation refers to a discrete occurrence or instance of a work in time and space; a physical embodiment of expression (DOCAM); an action or object that gives form to an abstract entity. This term also implies an element of variability — a manifestation is a discrete occurrence, one of multiple possible spatial and temporal instances of a work.” (Z. Miller & Röck, 2019). See also: Castriota, B. (2018). Centres in Flux: Authenticity in the Persistence and Recurrence of Contemporary Artworks. In: Book of Abstracts. NACCA Symposium 2018. From different perspectives to common grounds in contemporary art conservation, 25 - 26 June 2018, Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences, TH Köln, p. 19.
a recurrent subject discussed in the correspondence between van Straaten and Balka, and apparently it was not easy to find a solution that could satisfy both sides. According to Kerckhove, during his stay in Otterlo in 1994, the artist decided to take the original piece of textile with him back to Poland as a reference in order to find a new one. Van Straaten kept a fragment of the fabric and deposited it in the institutional archive. Unfortunately, as he would inform the director, the artist’s search was not successful. Finally, the museum team went ahead and installed the indoor piece, choosing the textile and the heating element themselves to mimic their appearance as recorded in the photographic documentation of the Arnhem show. The ‘blanket’ produced by the KMM was fitted precisely to the dimensions of the box, with the edges turned up to prevent them from fraying. Kerckhove affirms that the solution had been accepted by the artist, and the work was shown in that shape for the next five years. However, in December 2000 during his visit to the museum Balka expressed his considerable dissatisfaction with the appearance the indoor element, especially the ‘blanket’. He requested that the textile should touch just three walls of the steel box.

---

154 The ‘blanket issue’ is mentioned various times in the correspondence between Balka and Evert van Straaten, starting with the letter from 1994: “In the case of electric blanket we talked about in the Lipchitz’ room [the solution] is very good. With the heating cables, can You find and ask in the place where they make electric-blankets is it possible to get only heating cables, so we can glue them to the felt and cover the earth in steel box. (The cables from Arnhem where too heavy I think.) Can you check it please?” (Balka, M (1994, April 20). Letter to Evert van Straaten]. KMM Archive, Otterlo). Balka returned to the ‘blanket-issue’ in his next letter to van Straaten, by asking if it would be possible to discuss the problem during his upcoming visit to the museum: “I would like during my stay in Otterlo to discuss with you a new project and finish old one (piece inside - do you think that it will be possible to get electric-heating cover?...)” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 5).

155 The fragment of textile is accompanied by a handwritten, partially indecipherable note by Evert van Straaten. Also van de Kerckhove (2000, p. 7) mentions that “Evert was the one who therefore preserved a remnant of the flannel” and “The piece of flannel is kept in the museum’s materials archives”. In the next letter, the director ensures the artist that “we kept all materials for the Sonsbeek piece together now, till you will find a suitable electric blanket in Poland” (Van Straaten, E. (1994, October 25). Letter to Miroslaw Balka]. KMM Archive, Otterlo).

156 “I checked the situation with electric blankets on polish [sic] market. And this dosen’t [sic] look positive. The blankets they have (this is what I found) have 70-W, and they are plugged [sic] directly to 220V. So maybe we should say ‘I am sorry’ to the old Sonsbeek’ heating cables. […]” (Balka, M (1994, October 26). Letter to Evert van Straaten]. KMM Archive, Otterlo).

157 There is no precise information on how and when Balka accepted the result. It is possible that he inspected the work himself during his next visit to Otterlo, on 1 August 1995. See: van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 5.
and be shortened so as to uncover a strip of soil the exact width of the artist’s palm.\footnote{158}

Moreover, from the outset there was a misunderstanding regarding the type of textile which should cover the heating cables. In all of the correspondence between Balka and van Straaten, the material proposed by the artist seems to be felt, while both the blanket from Arnhem and the reconstructed one were made of flannel. Kerckhove’s report ends with an undated note stating, “Balka has informed me that he bought a new blanket” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 9) and the photographic documentation in the KMM archive dated March 2001 depicts Kerckhove herself preparing a new felt cover for the steel box. There is, however, no recorded evidence of Balka approving the ultimate solution.\footnote{159}

\subsection*{2.3.3 From Accumulated Sanctions to Artwork-Related Documentation}

The history of 211x179x125, 190x129x73 has made it possible to identify the artist’s sanctions that establish features pointing to the piece’s potential interpretations and thus meanings. The initial physical features of the artwork were sanctioned by Balka through the final drawings and instructions made for the exhibition in Arnhem (Figure 21-22) and the display of elements documented through photographs. The decision to relocate the piece, the choice of the new location and the replacement of the elements implied a new set of sanctions, established in collaboration with the museum and recorded, among others, in the notes by the former museum director held in the museum archive. The most recent sanctions, documented in Kerckhove’s report, concern the final appearance of the textile ‘blanket’ covering the soil in the steel box.

\footnote{158} “The point is that the flannel is not well placed. The cloth is supposed to touch three edges and leave a 12 cm border of sand (roughly the same width as his hand) exposed on the fourth side.” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 6).

\footnote{159} In the handwritten note by Evert van Straaten that accompanies the fragment of fabric held in the museum archive, the last sentence states, “The current piece of cloth is too tight! and would have to be replaced” (De huidige lap stof is te krap! en zou dus vervangen moeten worden – translation from Dutch by Lise Steyn). The size and kind of textile used for the ‘blanket’ were not the only issues that the artist was unsatisfied with. Although the piece was from the outset intended for interaction with the public – to perceive the ‘human’ heat of the blanket visitors need to put their hands on it – the museum labelled the inner element with a ‘do not touch’ sign. This decision was made because of two factors: firstly, the hazardous curiosity of what is hidden behind the blanket and what the source of the felt’s warmth is, and secondly, the white fabric getting constantly dirty. Balka requested to remove the ban on touching and to encourage people to interact with the piece through a ‘please touch’ label.
While the way the artist sanctioned the physical aspects of the piece can be identified by analysing the sequence of key events in the artwork’s trajectory, the establishment of conceptual features is more difficult to tackle. The most important associations for the artwork’s reading, i.e. the notions of home and grave, are conveyed through the artist’s biography (for instance the story of the artist’s grandfather and father), the preparatory drawings, the conversations between the curator and the artist published in the catalogue of the show, as well as the initial setting of the piece (in an abandoned house/near the cemetery).

To evaluate the use of artists’ sanctions as references for conservation-related decision making, the issue of the relationship between earlier and later sanctions needs to be addressed. Do later sanctions override earlier ones? The decision to relocate the piece to the museum grounds implied new sanctions which ran counter to the previous ones. Assuming that 211x179x125, 190x129x73 was conceived as site-specific, not only in terms of physical location but also as embedded in the context of the Sonsbeek 93 exhibition and its themes, the initial location of the piece is one of the most significant features sanctioned by the artist. If we consider that sanctions are replaceable and only the latter ones should be considered for meaning making, we could assume that since the ‘tombness’ as a feature of the outdoor piece is less perceivable in the new location, this meaning must have lost its importance in comparison to the first one. However, as the reading of a contemporary artwork does not depend only on the art object, in its new location 211x179x125, 190x129x73 would be still associated with the home, beds, graves, duality and the connection between life and death. Hence, based on the standpoint that changeability is an inherent feature of contemporary artworks and an artwork exists in various forms, I propose to consider the artist’s sanctions as not replaceable but accumulative.

In her analysis and evaluation of the possible strategies for securing the artwork’s continuation, Kerckhove adopted a different standpoint: to draw exclusively on the last manifestation of the piece. Although the history of the artwork and the artist’s sanctions were well documented by the museum, for Kerckhove the information collected seemed to be too scarce to allow for the relocation of the piece within the museum grounds without risking the alteration of some of its meaning-making features:
If it were necessary to move Balka’s work in the Kröller-Müller Museum and someone else were to attempt to do so, the risk of taking a ‘wrong decision’ would [be] higher than for many other works. However well-intended the approach of that other person might be, there would be a serious risk of either producing an excessive (‘wrong’) harmony with the surroundings or – in an overzealous attempt to avoid that pitfall – overstressing the identity of the work and giving it an overbearing presence (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 3).

As a consequence, Kerckhove decided to discuss this subject directly with the artist. She suggested that if the architecture of the museum were to undergo changes, it might be necessary to relocate the piece again in the future. The artist’s response was concise: “ask me when it comes to it, and if I’m no longer here ask my son” (van de Kerckhove, 2000, p. 3). One can read between the lines of Kerckhove’s report that at that time Balka was not interested in giving the institution the ‘access code’ to his artwork. His choices related to the new location were not documented, as probably many of them were more intuitive than rational, and as such difficult for the artist to express and for observers to understand. It is much easier to work with concrete instructions, such as the detailed measurements provided for the first manifestation of the piece; however, in art one must accept that not everything is quantifiable.

Nevertheless, if one considers artist sanctions not as replaceable but rather as accumulative, the range of information that can feed decisions about its next manifestation becomes much broader. Following this line of thought, KMM’s decision on the future location of the piece might be informed by the features of both previous ones. Moreover, Balka’s choice to relocate the artwork might also be seen as sanctioning it as a ‘movable’ piece that can be adapted to different locations. The same principle may be applied to the two reconstructed elements. If they were once sanctioned as replaceable, they might be reconstructed again in the future.

This case study has shown that the artist’s sanctions, although helpful as references in analysing the development of an artwork’s career, can also be ambiguous and contradictory, and, as such, subject to different interpretations. Therefore, a particular sanction established by the artist should not be seen as the ultimate reference for
shaping an artwork’s perpetuation, but rather contextualised within the broader sequence of events. This means that the identity of an artwork, including all its potential interpretations, is dependent not only on the features sanctioned most recently, but also on all decisions made and actions carried out by the artist throughout the artwork’s entire career. This reflection allows the focus to be shifted from the current features of an art object to features of the artwork recorded in the artwork-related documentation, whose quality can then be assessed.

Although the core of this study was Kerckhove’s report, from the outset it was clear that it was necessary to consult other sources as well. The KMM is a small-scale museum and it has just one collection-related archive where both conservation and curatorial file information about the artworks is stored. In the case of Balka’s piece, among typical documents that can be encountered in most of the museum archives – registration data and acquisition records, invoices and contracts included, and all documentation of the care and maintenance of the artworks – it holds a fascinating collection of correspondence. There are letters, faxes and emails exchanged between the artist and the museum, along with communications carried out with and by the museum director, including semi-private ones such as Christmas cards. It is worth mentioning here that the discussed artwork is not the only sculpture by Balka in the KMM collection. Just after the acquisition of the piece from Sonsbeek 93, the director commissioned a new work, which made it possible to maintain an active dialogue on 211x179x125, 190x129x73 long after the translocation of the artwork was finalized. The analysis of Kerckhove’s report together with the content of the artwork’s documentation collected in the KMM archive demonstrated how even minor interactions between museums and artists, if documented, can contribute to and inform the conservation-oriented decision making. Numerous letters, faxes, invoices, notes and sketches meticulously gathered in one folder during the long collaboration between Balka and the museum, provided valuable new information about micro-decisions that influenced the shape of the artwork. In the context of a museum, documents related to the collected piece, both as an artwork and an art object that had been built or manufactured and later paid for, are often distributed across different archives, for instance an exhibitions archive or an administrative one. At the KMM, thanks to the awareness of the museum staff,

160 200x238x95, Ø 19x16 (fountain) (1996-2001), inventory number: KM 130.516.
in this particular case the conservator and the museum director, these records were brought together to form one rich body of artwork-related documentation – a collection of the artist’s sanctions and an overview of the circumstances in which they were set.

As the case study has made clear, it is collaboration with the artist that makes it possible to collect the artist’s sanctions. Undoubtedly, neither the conservator’s report nor other documents analysed in this section provide enough space to develop the sort of narratives encompassed by the artist interview. Kerckhove’s report is a clearly personal testimony and the artist’s statements are filtered through the memory and perception of the author. However, although her thoughts, doubts, and opinions are hardly distinguishable from the facts, they add a new level of information, or in other words a new perspective on the artist’s stories. As such, they constitute a valuable contribution to the artwork-related documentation.

2.4 After-Easter Show

As a result of the good will arising from Tate’s collaboration with the artist on the Unilever Series 2009 and the recent acquisition of the video work Carousel 2004, the artist has offered a gift of sculptural material relating to his early performance work After-Easter show. [...] Although the individual elements have been shown by the artist in more than one context, he has now decided that these elements should be brought together in one collection and shown as an assemblage, perhaps in combination with documentation of the performance itself. Acceptance of the proposed gift will mean that Balka’s performative work is represented in the Collection for the first time. (Sainsbury, 2010, p. 1)

2.4.1 What is Significant?

In her seminal article Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations, Laurenson (2006) proposes that conservation might be understood as the means by which the significant properties of an artwork are documented, understood and maintained. She argues that the identification and examination of significant properties helps in recognizing where to focus attention in order to understand what is important for the conservation of a particular work (Laurenson, 2014). This subchapter takes as its starting point Laurenson’s opinion
that the artist interview remains a means for artists to articulate significant properties of their work (Laurenson, 2006, para. 48) and for keepers to identify and document them. Following this assumption, it looks at how judgements regarding what is significant might be established during and through the artist interview, and demonstrates that this depends on the context in which the interview is carried out and, when used as a reference, on how it has been interpreted.

This case study begins with the story recalled by Bałka in the interview about Black Pope, Black Sheep conducted at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (see: p. 108) concerning his collaboration with Tate’s conservation department in restoring one of his early artworks. Taking into consideration the long-term relationship between Bałka and Tate and the fact that this particular museum is considered a leader in the research and development of practices related to the care of contemporary artworks, I decided to explore how the collaboration between the artist and the institution unfolded and how it was documented.  

161 Balka’s collaboration with Tate started in late 1994, with the acquisition of his early sculpture Fire Place (1986). In 1995 this and other sculptures were included in the major show Rites of Passage: Art for the end of the century. In 1995 Tate organized a Bałka solo exhibition, Dawn (11/1995-1/1996), acquiring five pieces displayed there. The artist then reused these pieces in the group show Between Cinema and a Hard Place. In 1998-9 Tate acquired two early works: Ø7,5x159x16,5-195x47x90-Ø6x18 cm (1991) and Oasis (C.D.F) (1989). The culmination of their collaboration was the 2009 Unilever Series commission, when Bałka built the monumental How It Is in the Turbine Hall. Tate’s last acquisition of his work was in 2010 with the video installation Carrousel (2004). Information on this collaboration was compiled during research in the Tate Archives in 1/2017, along with information from Tate’s website.
The artwork described by Bałka as restored together with conservators from Tate is entitled *After-Easter Show* (1986) and, as depicted in photographs published on the Tate website, it consists of a white rabbit figure, a hat with rabbit ears suspended above the latter, and a set of metal foothold traps arranged on the floor (Figure 23-24). The rabbit is stitched together from diverse kinds of fabric, shaped over a metal frame reinforced with steel mesh and stuffed with textile. The hat with a papier-mâché-like appearance is decorated with textile ribbons attached on its rear. The forty-three traps, whose shape resembles jaws, are made of steel and painted white. According to the artist’s story, in the late 1980s the piece was purchased by a minor Polish museum and since then had been kept in inadequate conditions which resulted

162 See: http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/balka-after-easter-show-t13263
163 The materials are described according to the list form the *Pre-Acquisition Condition Report* consulted in the Tate Archive: Deighton, S., Sculpture conservation pre-acquisition condition report, 22 February 2011, T13263 Conservation File, Tate Archive, London.
164 The identification of the materials made by the conservator in the pre-acquisition condition report was later on revised by the artist: “I think [...] it was like clothes or it was just paint maybe the thick paint because it looks strange to be papier-mâché. I am not sure but maybe it was very thin textile [...]” (Rolfe, 2011, p. 1).
in serious damage due to pest infestation (Figure 33). Balka withdrew the piece from the collection and repaired it himself with the clear intention of afterwards depositing it with Tate. Only the rabbit-ear hat was left in its current state, as the artist decided that this element should be restored by the museum team. In 2011, upon the accession of the piece to the museum collection, Balka visited Tate’s premises to be interviewed about the artwork by the sculpture conservator responsible for new acquisitions. The conversation was recorded, transcribed and deposited in After-Easter Show’s file in the museum archive, which I consulted during the fieldwork carried out in 2017. The following sections present the origins of the artwork and its early interpretations, and track its transformation from a performance piece to a sculpture and how this change has been embraced, documented and endorsed by the institution.

2.4.2 Representation of a Performative Artwork: In search of the artwork’s identity

As described by art critic and curator Anda Rottenberg (1994), After-Easter Show, which took place on the 1st of April 1986 at Gallery Wieża in Warsaw, was an ‘exhibition-action’, an event that in today’s nomenclature would be called a performance. It was one in a series of ‘holiday exhibitions’ – artistic actions by Neue Bierremiennost’, a collective consisting of Balka and two of his friends (Rottenberg, 1994, p. 16). This one was organized on April Fools’ Day, which in 1986 fell on the first Tuesday after the Easter holiday. At that time Gallery Wieża was located in the tower of an active church, and the setting placed the event in the framework of religious rituals. The performance started with a lottery – three people from the...

---


166 And also to teach a lesson to the former owner: “Yes, that was my ambition, to do bring the sculpture to life, also to show the other institution this is not the way it works, especially that they had really been destroying the sculpture by their ignorance and the way they treated it you know”. See: Rolfe, M. (2011, April). Interview with Miroslaw Balka. [Interview transcript]. T13263 Conservation File. Tate Archive, London.

167 The After-Easter Show (original title in Polish: “Pokaz postświąteczny”) was curated by Joanna Kiliszek. The description of the event offered here combines information from various sources, mainly: Rottenberg, 1994; Redzisz & Sienkiewicz, 2012, p. 86; and the interview with Joanna Kiliszek conducted by the author on 15 January 2017 in London.

168 Marek Kijewski and Miroslaw Filonik; more information about Neue Bierremiennost can be found in Redzisz & Sienkiewicz, 2012.
public were selected to participate in the show and each of them was given a hat with rabbit ears (Figure 25-29). Balka himself, playing the role of emcee, was wearing a similar headdress with two ribbons on the back resembling a papal tiara. The figure of the white rabbit was situated in the middle of the room, surrounded by flowerpots containing green shafts of new wheat—a common symbol of nature’s spring awakening. The ‘jaws’, freshly painted white, were placed on the floor and joined together with a nylon thread. According to Rottenberg (1994), they looked rather innocent, like paper mock-ups of traps. At one point, the winners of the lottery, accompanied by the artist, started to slowly surround the public with the ‘chains’ of traps. The show reached its climax when Balka opened the rabbit’s mouth, illuminated from within by a red bulb, to reveal another of the metal ‘jaws’ resembling sharp teeth. Suddenly “the rabbit lost its Easter bunny appearance” (Rottenberg, 1994, p. 20). In the background, the Russian version of the toreador aria from Bizet’s Carmen played loudly (Redzisz & Sienkiewicz, 2012, p. 86). While commenting on the course of the event, Rottenberg notes that “all objects used in the show were robbed of the rank of autonomous works and served as props used to play a leading part. This however, was only gradually revealed in the subsequent stages” (Rottenberg, 1994, p. 18).

The transformation from performance piece into sculpture had already gotten underway just a few weeks after the show, when what Rottenberg calls “props” were shown as a sculptural assemblage in a collective exhibition at a small-town exhibition space in eastern Poland. The composition of the elements was considerably different than the arrangement presented later on for Tate. In the photograph published in the exhibition’s leaflet, the rabbit is placed in the centre of a vitrine-like frame, with the ‘jaws’ set in a row in front of it and on the floor (Figure 32). The vitrine stands on a sort of windowsill with the window’s shutters as a background. One rabbit-ear hat is suspended in front of the animal. Later on in 1997, during Balka’s solo show in Valencia some of the jaws/traps piled on a white pedestal were displayed as an autonomous work called Untitled (Sin título), 1986 (Figure 30-31). In 2010 Tate

---


Figure 30-32. Elements from *After-Easter Show* arranged in different exhibitions. Fig 30-31: 
During the exhibition *Miroslaw Balka. Revision 1986-1997*, 24th of April – 29th of July 1997, 
Valencia: IVAM Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, pp. 132–144. Fig. 33: During the exhibition 
*Figures and Objects (Figury i przedmioty)*, BWA Gallery in Pulawy, April – May 1986; source: 
Projects, p. 105.
decided to acquire Balka’s video installation *Carrousel* (2004), and as the excerpt quoted at the opening of this subchapter mentions, the purchase was accompanied by a generous gift from the artist (Salisbury, 2010).

The history of the piece and the circumstances of its creation show that in 2010 Balka not only revived the artwork but also reinterpreted it by creating the ‘Tate version’, an assemblage that had never before existed. For this new manifestation elements of the piece were arranged and photographed at the artist’s studio, and images from this shoot were sent to Tate as installation instructions. Although the report of Tate curator Helen Sainsbury for the Tate acquisition committee suggests that in the collection the piece would be representing Balka’s performative work (Sainsbury, 2010), at a certain point of its career the artwork was actually ‘sculpturized’, ultimately entering the museum as a sculpture. As the following sections argue, this transformation, initiated by the artist himself, has been ‘cemented’ through institutional practices, including the artist interview.

2.4.3 Establishing an Artwork’s Significant Properties through the Artist Interview

The interview was conducted by the sculpture conservator, and was audio recorded and transcribed. Although the information about its purpose is lacking – the transcript is simply entitled *Interview with Miroslaw Balka, [...] Discussing; T13263 ‘After Easter Show’*, the first question posed by the conservator clarifies this issue: “So you were really wanting to talk more about what We [sic] do to this now, to the cap?” (Rolfe, 2011, p. 1). As this query suggests, the main purpose of the conversation was to establish the treatment plan for the rabbit-ear hat, which was to be carried out by Tate’s conservation department. It also implies that the subject of the conversation or even the encounter itself was the artist’s initiative.

The conversation revolves around the materials and their use, meaning and importance, and starts with observations on the poor condition of the piece after its withdrawal from its former caretaker. Later, it moves to the renovation of the rabbit figure carried

---

171 Original spelling.
out by the artist and the decisions taken during the process. Balka describes how he removed the damaged fragments of textile, both from the inside and outside of the sculpture, and filled the inner cavities with a synthetic foam. Parts of the original stuffing, untouched by insects, were reused to patch the gaps in the animal’s ‘skin’. In order to make the intervention distinguishable, Balka sewed the reconstructed parts with a new, bright white thread. In regard to the planned restoration of the hat, Balka states clearly that although he would like it to look similarly clean to the restored rabbit, the ‘patina of time’ should be preserved. In addition, the possible method of stiffening the rabbit’s ears and the choice of the hanging system for displaying the cap in the future are discussed meticulously. The last part of the conversation tackles the condition of the jaws and the way to visually neutralise the results of metal corrosion.

The performative origin of the piece is mentioned during the interview, but is not explored in detail. While discussing the repairs made by the artist, the conservator asks about the range of interventions in the area of the rabbit’s head and ears. Balka explains that when the animal was shown as a “kind of performance” there was “a small bulb inside the mouth, so part of the performance was that I opened the mouth and then it was shining” (Rolfe & Balka, 2011, p. 3). When the figure was shown later “as [a] sculpture” the bulb was continuously on, which resulted in scorch marks to the textile. Balka had therefore decided to remove the bulb and the wiring during the restoration: “So my intervention in 2010 was that I wanted to shut his mouth and so the rabbit is silenced and doesn’t say what happened to him in the past and so it was an emotional gesture” (Rolfe & Balka, 2011, p. 4). The conservator gives a short response: “That’s interesting; it gives him [sic] another level of meaning doesn’t it”, and then redirects the conversation back to the cleaning issues.

Following the assumption that the significant properties can be established by means of the artist interview, I scrupulously analysed the text of the transcript and listed these features of the artwork that need to be preserved in order to secure its identity. This examination was guided by my knowledge of Balka’s artistic practice, his approach to the materiality of his works and the history of the artwork as presented in the previous section. The first quality that defines the nature of the piece is the unique materials. While at the beginning of the conversation Balka asserts that at the time the sculpture was created, he did not pay attention to the materials that he used to shape
the animal’s figure, later on he speaks about the meaning and energy that they carry. Although during the renovation Bałka replaced part of the figure’s stuffing, he used the original matter to reconstruct the sculpture’s covering. The rescue of the artwork and its reconstruction by the artist are significant gestures, both from a historical and conceptual perspective, and so the visibility of the intervention should be maintained. As he states in the interview:

“[…] I didn’t want to make a new work, […] maybe I could make it even better, but I wanted to keep the original character and the shape of the sculpture as much as possible, and when I open [sic] the sculpture I found this element of the textile which were [sic] inside, so they were not dusted and so I decided to use it here.” (Rolfe, 2011, p. 2)

As the present arrangement of the objects as well as their appearance in terms of the level of cleanliness of the surface are emphasised by Bałka several times as important, the current manifestation might be seen as a pertinent cluster of visual properties of the piece. This includes the position of the rabbit – the way it ‘sits’, the arrangement of the jaws and the hat, and the fact that the latter needs to be hung from a nylon thread. Within this manifestation the initial function of the art objects as performance props is represented only by the suspension of the hat at the height of Bałka’s head, marking his symbolic presence in the ensemble, and the title of the piece. Nevertheless, even though the performative origin of the artwork is not discussed in the interview, should it be considered as a work-defining property as well?

2.4.4 Performance or Sculpture? The interview as part of the acquisition workflow

While Sainsbury’s report for the acquisition committee states that the artwork can be shown “perhaps in combination with documentation of the performance itself” (Sainsbury, 2010, p. 1), there is no record in the archive indicating that the museum ever collected such documentation. Despite the media variability of After-Easter Show

---

172 “At the time when I made it I didn’t put too much attention what would be inside […] and so actually all the materials I used are from this house” (Rolfe & Bałka, 2011, p. 1).

“I think that is important in my works, the emotional attitude to the materials, so materials are not just materials because of the three dimensional present [sic] but they are much more about energy and meaning which we carry […]” (Rolfe, 2011, p. 6)
(i.e. its ability to exist in at least in two different conditions, as a performance and as an autonomous sculpture), the piece was collected and studied in terms of conservation only as the latter. Why is the transformation of the artwork from performance to sculpture not commented or negotiated in any way, neither in the interview nor in the documentation of the artwork gathered by the institution? This section addresses this question by scrutinizing the Tate acquisition workflows within which artist interviews are produced, and argues that through the application of traditional classification principles reflected in the institutional structure, the museum tends to fix contemporary artworks in one particular state.

Upon its arrival at Tate, the artwork was labelled as a sculpture and as such entered the flow of acquisition procedures related to this particular medium. However, this categorisation left the performance outside the scope of conservation-related interest. For sculptures, the decision about whether it is necessary to contact the artist for conservation purposes is normally taken after the first inspection of the piece upon its arrival at the museum premises. The inspection is carried out by a conservator
responsible for supervising acquisitions, and the decision is made on the basis of the documentation collected to date. Issues to be clarified during the conversation are also identified at this stage. For *After-Easter Show*, collecting “information from the artist on how far the conservation treatment should go in repairing damage to the rabbit ear helmet” was pointed out as advisable, and this note steered the focus of all further steps (Deighton, S. (2011, February 22). Sculpture conservation pre-acquisition condition report, *T13263 Conservation File*. Tate Archive, London).

If consultation with an artist is required, she or he can be contacted by phone, or a face-to-face meeting can be arranged. Phone calls are not recorded, so the information is usually briefly summarized in the documentation. If the artist is not available for conversation, questions can also be sent in written form to intermediaries such as galleries. Face-to-face meetings are generally audio recorded, with video usually being

---

The source of information about Tate’s workflows as presented in this section is a personal interview conducted by the author with Tate conservator in January 2017. The name of the interviewee will remain anonymous in this study.
reserved for documenting an artwork’s installation on display, which is also a common practice. The reason for limiting video recording is related to the availability of personnel, as it necessitates the involvement of an additional person. The interview is normally conducted by a conservator, and less often is done together with the relevant curator.

Prior to the meeting, the sculpture conservator contacted Balka by phone in a conversation that is evoked several times in the interview’s transcript. Emails were also exchanged – the artist sent Tate images depicting the condition of the rabbit figure before the reconstruction and the photographic documentation representing the way the elements should be arranged on display (Figure 33-34). The transfer of images was probably accompanied by written comments; however, these were not kept in the artwork’s record. As a result the images in the file were described incorrectly: those representing the desired arrangement of the elements are labelled as “official + cons views”. At Tate, face-to-face interviews are arranged only on an occasional basis, such that the majority of interviewees are UK-based artists. Frequently the conversation is set up ad-hoc: “Quite often you almost have to nip in and the curator might say: our conservator would like to ask you a few questions. And then you nip in and ask them things”. The interview with Balka was conducted on the occasion of the artist’s visit to London for the purpose of an exhibition at another venue. The transcript of the interview reveals that the interviewer was only somewhat familiar with Balka’s early artistic practice. It appears that in general at Tate the study undertaken prior to the ‘regular’ interview is limited to the documentation produced internally, in this case to the condition reports, images and curatorial description kept in the artwork’s record.

---

174 Personal Interview conducted by the author with Tate conservator, January 2017. For the purpose of this research the interviewee will remain anonymous.

175 “Official view” in Tate nomenclature refers to photographs of a work from the collection that can be presented to the public, e.g. on the museum website. See: Tate photography request form, 15 February 2011, T13263 Conservation File, Tate Archive.

176 Personal Interview conducted by the author with Tate conservator, January 2017. For the purpose of this research the interviewee will remain anonymous.

177 “MB: We found a house, an abandoned house in this village about 20km from Warsaw, so it was the first time that I presented by [sic] diploma work.
MR: Sorry I don’t know the history of your early work.
MB: So anyway the materials are from the house” (Rollin, 2011, p. 2).
As a result of this closed circuit of knowledge production, the scope of the questions asked during the interview is limited, which in turn restricts the information produced during the encounter.

One of the factors to consider when analysing the workflows of large-scale museums is the standardisation and optimization of the time that the employees can dedicate to particular tasks. According to the Tate Biennial Report, in 2015 and 2016 the museum acquired approximately 1100 artworks.\textsuperscript{178} Around 80 to 100 per year fall under the responsibility of the sculpture conservation department, which employs two conservators whose main obligation is to oversee new acquisitions, and whose duties also include communication with artists. Both work part-time, which together makes six workdays per week. Certainly, not all artworks need the same amount of attention, as they can vary from, for instance, small bronze figurines to complex installations comprising hundreds of elements. However, even if we assume that the museum employees worked the whole year without holidays, they would only be able to spend three-and-a-half days on each artwork, which in many cases might not be enough.

Besides the work overload, another factor that influences the interview’s focus is the general institutional approach or museum policy in relation to collecting information from artists for conservation purposes, which for Tate is clearly framed as material-oriented.\textsuperscript{179} Tate has a long history of interviewing artists (see: Chapter 1, p. 57) and the practice of carrying out so-called ‘conservation interviews’ is described in a text published on the museum website:

“Artists have first-hand knowledge of the materials and techniques used in making their own works, and may have particular views about how their pieces should look and be displayed. Discussions with them can help to establish the acceptable parameters of display (the design of plinths, frames, projectors etc.). When the materials or techniques used in making an artwork seem potentially problematic, the artist’s views on any future

\textsuperscript{178} Tate Report 2015/2016, Appendix A, Tate Collection Acquisitions, retrieved from: http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/103588

\textsuperscript{179} For the brief introduction to Tate’s practices related to interviewing artists see: Chapter 1, p. 57.
The same text informs about protocols and detailed guidelines related to interviews that have been developed by the museum, although a more specific description of these protocols has not been provided. However, during the research conducted in the institution, I was fortunate enough to be granted access to the artist-interview guidelines of Tate’s sculpture conservation department. In line with the excerpt from Tate’s website quoted above, the guidelines focus mostly on the physical aspects of artworks, without addressing their meanings and the contexts of their creation. Even though the sculpture conservation department is responsible for all kinds of three-dimensional pieces, contemporary artworks in the form of complex installations included, the questions refer mostly to traditional sculptures. Furthermore, contrary to what the artist-interview literature advises, the guidelines consist of example questions directly addressing possible interventions, asking for instance: How far can we go in maintaining the appearance of a work? Can we repaint areas or replace corroded/deteriorated elements? In consequence, the transformation of After-Easter Show from a performance to a sculpture was not addressed in the interview because at the time of its acquisition it was probably not considered a conservation-related issue within the framework of sculpture conservation. Would it have been a different story if the artwork had been accessioned to the collection as a performance? Performance art acquired by Tate falls under the responsibility of the time-based media conservation department, for which liaisons with artists, their studios and supporting teams is a key task (Lewis, 2015). For artworks with intangible or ephemeral aspects, such as many time-based media artworks including performance, the conservator’s role is often to help ‘negotiate the artwork into the collection’, or, in other words, to mediate the nature of the piece that enters the museum holdings. That does not mean that the ‘sculpturalisation’ of After-Easter Show carried out by the artist would or should be

180 See: Conservation Interviews, Tate website, retrieved from: http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/interviews-artists/conservation-interviews.

181 Bery B., Basic interview. Tate guides. Undated. Unpublished. Courtesy Tate. The document is lacking the date of issue, but as it was authored by an intern who worked at Tate around 2007, I assume that it is approximately a decade old.

182 Bery B., Ibid.
reversed, but its performative past would be potentially acknowledged, documented and perhaps even integrated into the collection through the purchase of the existing documentation.\footnote{\textsuperscript{183}} Also, the way this performative side should be preserved by the museum might be negotiated with the artist, possibly through an artist interview, which might follow a completely different course than the one carried out by the sculpture conservator, and therefore offering another cluster of ‘significant properties’.

2.4.5 Properties that were Significant in the Past may Become Significant in the Future

There are several interpretations of \textit{After-Easter Show} as a performance, but I will return once again to Sainsbury’s report, which reads:

“Balka’s performative works often took the form of some kind of game or ritual played out at the opening of an exhibition. Intended to trigger the imagination and often improvised, the final results were unpredictable. Much of the work from the 1980s relates to Balka’s own experiences growing up in Poland under martial law and the oppression of Catholicism under the Russian regime. Balka felt that the church was often seen as the only challenger to Russian oppression, and that secular resistance was largely overlooked. Balka felt that real opposition was to take care of one’s own life and behaviour, whereas religion only offered another set of rules. Sitting meekly at the start of the performance the Easter bunny may be seen as a sacrificial lamb, yet the sinister revelations of the finale suggest that this victim might also be capable of menace itself, maybe even in turn becoming the oppressor.” (Sainsbury, 2010, p.2)

\footnote{\textsuperscript{183} The photographic documentation of the event is rather scarce and dispersed. There are some images in the artist’s private archive, although the copyrights probably belong to other people involved in the performance, both the organizers and the public. Joanna Kiliszek, curator of the 1986 show, recalled in an interview conducted by the author that ephemerality was a part of the event: “We just did not document anything, what is left is just the dates and some photos made by friends, or pictures I took myself, black and white and nothing else. [...] And this transience was intrinsic to the whole idea, which of course from a contemporary perspective is a big loss because it just stays in the memory of people, and memory is completely elusive. We did not publish catalogues either”. (J. Kiliszek, in-person interview, January 16, 2017. Translated from the Polish by the author.)}
Are these meanings still perceptible after the artwork’s transformation into a sculptural assemblage? One of the key elements currently missing is the eerie metamorphosis of the rabbit. In the photograph of the work available on the Tate website, the animal looks almost pitiful, with its mouth closed in an eerie smile. If the artwork could be classified as both the sculptural assemblage and the representation of the performance, it could theoretically be displayed in both ways. When shown as a performance, the elements could be arranged according to and/or together with historical documentation, accompanied by the flowerpots, the missing rabbit-ear caps and the Russian version of the Toreador Song played over loudspeakers. The future museum and the future public might one day be interested in re-enacting the performance itself. If the re-opening of the rabbit’s mouth and the re-insertion of the red bulb were not an option due to the fragility of the original materials and the importance of the artist’s reconstruction considered as an artist’s decision, it could be conceivably carried out with exhibition copies produced for this purpose. The different manifestations of the artwork – the performative one and the sculptural reinterpretation – could co-exist in the museum collection. Decisions on displaying the work in one way or another might be taken on the basis of different clusters of significant properties that, while offering divergent narratives, are in my view equally justifiable.

It is true that the concept of ‘significant properties’ might be seen as a useful reference to identify what features best secure the artwork’s perpetuation, and, likewise, the artist interview is a source that might support the recognition of these features. However, the story of After-Easter Show has demonstrated that both tools should be used with caution. Although the recent scholarship recognizes the multi-levelled subjectivity of the information produced during the interview and the negotiated and interpretative nature of documentation as such (see: Chapter 1, p. 52 and p. 72), the assumption persists that there is a single, authoritative constellation of significant properties of each artwork at any given moment. Nevertheless, the properties that are significant for the artist may shift over time, and might differ from those that a curator,

---

184 A good example of a performance converted into an installation is Quadrille (1975/2013) by Rose English, also in the Tate collection (see: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/english-quadrille-t14673). In this case the origin of the current manifestation is reflected not only through the displayed visual documentation, but also by the two dates given for its creation – one for the performance and another for the installation.
a sculpture conservator, a time-based media conservator or an audience member might regard as essential to the artwork. Moreover, the values associated with these roles are not monolithic, and it is possible for an individual to identify diverse clusters of significant properties. These clusters may even be mutually exclusive, depending on the individual’s ability to acknowledge and embrace other values or perspectives. Therefore, the artist interview seen as a source should not stand alone as the foundation of the work-defining properties, whose process of identification must include the scope of all the artwork’s meanings acquired throughout its career and diverse constellations of features significant at its different stages. This multiplicity of required references points to the importance of artwork-related documentation and emphasises the need to render it not only interdisciplinary but also open-ended.

The collaboration between Balka and Tate on the restoration of *After-Easter Show*, praised by the artist during our conversation, never reached its stated goal – the actual treatment of the hat discussed in the interview has not been performed. Since its accession to the Tate collection the artwork has remained in storage, and so the restoration of the cap has yet to become a priority for the museum’s conservators.\(^\text{185}\) When the time is right and the museum decides to put *After-Easter Show* on public display, not only will the treatment become necessary, but also the contextualisation of the artwork, and its location within the art historical discourse or narrative of a particular show. That may trigger the need to complete the information about the performance that is lacking in the archive, therefore necessitating additional research. One may hope that when that time comes the artist will still be available for further collaboration.

\(^{185}\) Personal Interview conducted by the author with Tate conservator, January 2017. For the purpose of this research the interviewee will remain anonymous.
2.5 Summary of the First Phase of the Research: 
Paving the way for further investigation

2.5.1 Sanctions, Properties and Meanings: Conclusions

The applied methodology of theoretical sampling has involved a critical reflection on the three theoretical categories selected for examination: artwork’s meanings, artist’s sanctions and artwork’s significant properties, all tested as potential references for conservation decision making. In a departure from the premise of a single meaning, the study has exhibited the polysemy of contemporary artworks, and divided their meanings into two categories: firstly, those established fully or partially by the artist, and secondly, those generated without the artist’s direct involvement and beyond her or his control. Meanings from both clusters are subjectively constructed entities and the process of meaning making is creative by nature. In consequence, the conservation strategies must not be built on one meaning but consider the synergy of meanings that occurs at the intersection of the two categories. Because of their subjective nature, meanings as a reference in conservation decision making need to be accompanied by contextual information indicating how these meanings were produced. The second part of the investigation has revealed that the artist’s sanctions, although seemingly indisputable, concrete actions, can also be ambiguous and contradictory and, as such, subject to different interpretations. Therefore, a singular sanction established by the artist must not be seen as the ultimate reference for steering an artwork’s perpetuation, but analysed within the sequence of events that constitute the artwork’s career. The third notion, work-defining properties, is contingent on the individual and his or her particular approach to the artwork in question, as well as the stage of the artwork’s career in which they are established. In other words, each of the artwork’s stakeholders may isolate a different set of significant properties. Features that have been significant in the past might regain their relevance in the future, whether or not they lose importance at a given moment. By establishing one set of significant properties, the museum, in its authority as the artwork’s keeper, might fix an inherently changeable contemporary artwork in a single state, a process that could become irreversible once the author ceases to be available.
Despite all of these critical reflections, the three notions are useful tools in establishing points of reference for developing conservation strategies, but need to be used thoughtfully. Caretakers should have the capacity to recognise the complexity of contemporary artworks and be aware of the fact that their choices may permanently limit this complexity. As I argue in Chapter 1, one of the ways to grasp the multifarious nature of a contemporary artwork is by testing it against the potential features established in the previous chapter: its conceptuality, contextuality, processuality, and media-variability (see: Chapter 1, p. 36).

The notions of artwork’s meanings, artist’s sanctions and work-defining properties are interrelated and dependent on each other. Meanings, both those established or sanctioned by the artist as well as those shaped by the context, might act as factors for determining significant properties. An artist’s sanctions establish features pointing to potential interpretations and thus meanings of the piece. The significant properties of a piece might be identified based on the analysis of the artwork’s meanings and artist’s sanctions, and by contextualising these against the background of the artwork’s history and the context in which the artist’s sanctions were delivered and artwork’s meanings were established. All these notions are dependent on individual perspectives, judgements or interpretations, and this subjectivity manifests itself on multiple levels.

2.5.2 From Interview to Documentation: Developing a conceptual approach to the uses of the artist interview

What have these case studies shown us about how to implement novel contemporary-art conservation strategies in a museum setting? In the specific case of the artist interview, what we have seen is that, while it is a suitable tool for gathering stories about the artwork and a reliable source as to the artwork’s meanings, artist’s sanctions and work-defining properties, the method’s potential is not fully exploited in the institutional setting, mostly due to insufficient resources. In the case of Black Pope, Black Sheep, the artist interview with Balka was a pilot project and a one-time occurrence. Although the original intention was to share the interview on the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw’s website, to this day this goal has yet to be accomplished. At the end of 2015 I left the museum to take on a doctoral position at the University of Amsterdam, and the only interview-related work that the museum performed after my
departure was to commission the transcription of the video recording. The Collection Documentation Programme has been abandoned due to a lack of time and resources.\textsuperscript{186} As for 211x179x125, 190x129x73, although the research reveals that at present the information collected by the Kröller-Müller Museum regarding the artwork’s possible futures is not sufficient for informed decision making and needs to be expanded further in collaboration with the artist, the museum has postponed establishing a long-term strategy for its conservation until the piece’s next installation. Again, the main reason for this is time and resources, as the museum has other priorities to deal with on the day-to-day basis. The case study investigated at Tate, in turn, has shown that the artist interview, although conducted around the time of the acquisition, nevertheless failed to consider the performative origins of the collected artwork, as well as the essential changes that the artwork underwent during its career. Instead, it was focused on collecting factual information related to the material composition of the piece and the technical issues to be faced during the forthcoming treatment. The conversation was shaped by the scope of the preparatory research, limited, due to time-constrains, to the internally produced documentation. It is important to note here that this is not an isolated case, as museums everywhere struggle to achieve the support – financial and otherwise – that they need in order to carry out their work with the rigor that they themselves would like.

Although in the course of this chapter the artist interview has been confirmed as a source of artwork’s meanings, artist’s sanctions and work-defining properties, the case studies have also made clear that other sources – such as the correspondence between the artist and the museum or the report written by Kerckhove – fulfil this purpose as well. In all source types, information might be filtered through the participants’ memories and their understanding of the facts, and so when used is subject to interpretation. The interview has its own dependencies, for instance the communication skills of a particular artist, the scope of the research conducted beforehand, the selection and

\textsuperscript{186} The institution is facing permanent problems with space – until now all the venues and storage spaces have had a temporary character and therefore all systematic work related to documentation of the collection has been postponed until this condition changes. The museum is currently involved in the construction of a new, permanent building which is scheduled to open in 2022.
sequence of the questions to ask, etc. As such, the artist interview as a method for collecting references and a source thereof for conservation decision making needs to be embedded in and contrasted with other types of documents related to the artwork.

The shape of the artist interview relies on circumstances and conventions governing the setting in which it was conducted. Both interviews presented in this chapter – the first regarding *Black Pope, Black Sheep* and the second *After-Easter Show* – were conducted by museum conservators. They refer to formally similar artworks from the oeuvre of one artist, created in the same period. And yet, the two interviews happened under different circumstances, and that is clearly reflected in the outcome. The first one, in Warsaw, had a more holistic character and, although focused on issues related to the materiality of the piece, also addressed the circumstances and context of its creation, its exhibition history and its interpretations – all of which may influence the understanding of the piece's materiality. The aim of the second interview, at Tate, was to resolve a particular conservation-related problem that needed to be dealt with in the near future. In the first case, the conversation with the artist was a pilot case study in a larger project that the institution was planning to launch. It was also the first artist interview conducted in this particular museum and as such was granted all the necessary time and means. In the second case, the interview was a part of the everyday museum workflow, subjected to restrictions of time and means. But despite these major differences, both fit into the definition of the artist interview presented in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, and both have a value as a reference for making certain decisions about the artworks' future.

The examination of artwork’s meanings, artist’s sanctions and artwork’s significant properties in the framework of real-life case studies has exposed two main sites of tension that influence the use of the artist interview in museum settings and make contemporary art a perennial challenge for museums. The first one is the persistent object-oriented character of art institutions and the traditional, medium-based classification principles that they apply to the collected artworks, which contradicts the characteristics of contemporary art as outlined at the beginning of this book (see: Chapter 1, p. 36). As the study presented in this chapter has shown, an artwork’s identity is distributed between the art object and the stories produced during its career, and these stories are recorded in artwork-related documentation. Upon
acquisition, through the application of traditional classification principles museums divide the artwork between the collection and documentation. The collected part is usually one or several art objects, which are subsequently categorised by medium, checked in terms of completeness and condition, and eventually put on display or deposited in the museum storage. The documentation, on the other hand, usually belongs to the museum archive. Its examination and care is more time consuming as it involves research, rarely a priority for institutions, and not regarded as indispensable for an artwork’s conservation. As a consequence of the classification systems in place, different conservation measures are applied to different carriers of an artwork’s identity, depending on the extent to which they fit into the traditional concept of the autonomous work of art.

The second site of tension is the relationship between artists and institutions. Whereas the conservation scholarship acknowledges that the artist’s wishes regarding the future of their piece are not always to be taken for granted but rather critically evaluated and negotiated, in day-to-day reality the artist is seen as the supreme authority over her or his work. On the one hand, the status of the artist and his or her relationship with collecting institutions has shifted in important ways over the last half century, and this phenomenon is bound up with the development of new artistic practices such as conceptual art, site-specificity and institutional critique. The new kind of collaboration between artists and museums implies that the artwork often emerges

187 There are some remarkable exceptions to this rule. In the case of artworks that lack fixed material representation, museums sometimes accession documentation to the collection as a musealium. An example of such a practice has been described by Sanneke Stigter in her doctoral dissertation (Stigter, 2016). She describes how in 2007 the Kröller-Müller Museum acquired a piece by Jan Dibbets, All shadows that occurred to me in ................ are marked with tape (1969), which consists of lines of masking tape marking sunlit areas on the walls and floor of the gallery. Its appearance depends on the conditions of the space and it needs to be installed anew for each display. What the museum accessioned to its collection were documents – for example the invoice has been catalogued as a certificate with the inventory number KM 131.363 while the rest of the documentation is classified under the number KM 131.364. Both were specified as “related objects to the artwork” (Stigter, 2016, p. 198).

188 Site-specificity and associated strategies of institutional critique are related to the activism that led to the foundation of the Art Workers Coalition in New York in 1969. Its key demands were incorporated in the “Artists’ Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement” drafted by Robert Projansky and Seth Siegelaub, which grants artists control over where and how their works would be exhibited and reproduced (Bismarck et al., 2017, p. 108).
from a process of negotiation that blurs distinctions between artist, curator, conservator, historian, and even museum lawyer (Bismarck, Munder, & Schneemann, 2017, p. 108). On the other hand, many collaborations between artists and museums are still underpinned by a Romantic paradigm of creative genius, which is not only deeply rooted in Western tradition but also congruent with the structure of the art market (Zolberg, 1992). The second tendency appears between the lines of the sections of this chapter, as in all cases the range of actual negotiation of the artwork’s shape with Balka was rather limited. Although the creative process in contemporary art might be complex and more akin to the production of a feature film than an autonomous discrete object, the artist is still considered as a creator rather than originator or initiator in need of collaboration with facilitators. Moreover, both sides often accept this traditional vision, because it simplifies certain aspects of communication and might benefit both sides – artists keep their right to decide while institutions may easily rely on their decisions.

As a consequence of these observations, three focal points have been established, aimed at guiding the next part of the book: the empirical investigation. The first one is the artwork-related documentation in the museum – the way it is conceptualised, structured and used may impact the artwork’s possible futures. The second one is the internal structure and practices of a particular museum related to collection care – how they mimic traditional classification principles and how this influences the continuation of a contemporary artwork. The third one is collaboration with artists regarding artworks collected – how it is instigated, encouraged, nurtured, steered and documented in art museums.

The first phase of the research has allowed for the recognition of a complex network of interrelations and dependencies between the three key concepts that might be used as a reference in conservation-related decision making, and has proven the artist interview to be a valid method for their identification and documentation. However, it has also demonstrated that decisions regarding an artwork’s possible futures can be based only on an informed selection of these references. The longer the history of an artwork and the more information available, the more combinations of references can be made. Consequently, there is no single option but numerous informed conceivable decisions that can be made.
This conclusion proves the pertinence of the model of artwork-related documentation as a host for an artwork’s identity, conceptualised in the first chapter of this dissertation as a set whose elements produce knowledge through mutual interaction (see: Chapter 1, p. 74). Thanks to its non-hierarchical structure, all the elements are of equal importance. Selected components, here called stories, can be classified as carriers of an artwork’s meanings. Some are sanctioned by an artist, while others belong to further categories that may be assigned to the content of the set. In all the case studies the information from both the artist and the other sources is incomplete. While these deficiencies have been identified and indicated, it has been shown that each piece of information that enters the set by interacting with existing data fosters new queries to address, an observation which verifies the presumed openness of the set. However, if the conservation decision can be built only on the selection of the constituents, the question arises as to how to make an informed choice. Can artist interviews help conservators with this issue? At this point of the study the interview within the set of artwork-related documentation is just one of many facilitators of knowledge production. Does it have any other uses? What further interrelations are there between the documentation and the interview? Departing from the focal points identified earlier on and following the case-study approach, the next part of the research investigates these issues further through fieldwork conducted in two art museums – the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.