Collecting archives of objects and stories
On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum
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Publication date
2021

Document Version
Other version

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 3

Danh Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’:
“For any future exhibition of the piece, please contact the artist”

Forensics is, of course, not simply about science but also about the presentation of scientific findings, about science as an art of persuasion. Derived from the Latin *forensis*, the word’s root refers to the “forum”, and thus to the practices and skill of making an argument before a professional, political or legal gathering. In classical rhetoric, one such skill involved having objects address the forum. Because they do not speak for themselves, there is a need for a translation, mediation, interpretation between the ‘language of things’ and that of people. This involves the trope of *prosopopeia* – the figure in which a speaker artificially endows inanimate objects with a voice. [...] Forensics involves, then, a relation between three components: an object, a mediator and a forum [...].”
(Weizman & Keenan, 2012, pp. 28–29)

It is worth considering [...] whether artists talking about their work is not a thoroughly viable and particularly non-reifying way for art to appear in the world – including object-based work. Isn’t it invariably more stimulating to hear artists present their work than to have to go and look at their exhibitions?
(Wright, 2013, pp. 42–43)

3.1 Introduction: Art museums as museums of objects

Museums place the present in dialogue with the past by preserving and displaying objects from different periods with different values and meanings attached to them, and the collection of objects is central to the museum’s identity (Funcke, 2017). However, this interaction between museums and objects does not have to be seen as unidirectional. As shown by cultural sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2014), conventional artworks that exist as contained objects, with their specific physical
properties, have shaped the art museum through the ages, determining its structure, infrastructure, practices related to collection care and, above all, its classification strategies. The latter constitutes a crucial process whereby institutions, in this case museums, by standardising and synchronising actions across different areas, are able to function in an organised way (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). Many of the museum’s features modelled by the objecthood of its collection are hardly applicable to contemporary artworks, where objects might play an auxiliary role or even be entirely absent. Despite this, art museums, even those collecting contemporary art, still operate as “objectification machines” (Domínguez Rubio, 2014) that strive to transform and stabilise artworks as objects that can be exhibited, circulated, and classified, and often ‘force’ contemporary artworks to fit into their object-based rules and structures.

Following Domínguez Rubio’s perspective, this chapter aims to demonstrate that since objects perform a distinct function in contemporary art than in traditional art, the conventional classification principles and strategies of art museums are not sustainable when applied to contemporary artwork. Moreover, it shows how the endeavour to render contemporary works of art classifiable according to traditional principles can potentially affect their conservation. The argument unfolds around the motif of the artist’s stories that actively sanction aspects of an artwork, but also passively end up carrying the bulk of its identity. It demonstrates such stories’ importance for guiding an artwork’s reading and in consequence for informing conservation-related decision making, and looks at how these immaterial components of artworks are represented in the institutional infrastructure related to the collection. It also scrutinises the hierarchy and power dynamics in relationships between an artist and different institutions, and demonstrates how these influence the presentation strategies the different keepers devise for artworks in their collections.

The starting point of this chapter is the notion of ‘artwork constituency’ as introduced by Domínguez Rubio for the purpose of his research. The term was developed based on the observation that artworks usually enter museums not as a single ‘object’ but as a part of what he calls a ‘constituency’, which consists of all the elements that are acquired together with the artwork. They range from frames and vitrines to documents like contracts, installation instructions or artist notes. While Domínguez Rubio defines the ‘artwork constituency’ as composed of physical items, this chapter uses an
expanded variation on this term that dispenses with tangibility as a required feature. Here the ‘artwork constituency’ is understood as all information meaningful for an artwork’s identity that is gathered and produced around the process of acquisition for the museum collection. This modification aside, Domínguez Rubio’s stance that all these items “define the boundaries of the artwork and establish their meaning and value”, such that an artwork is in fact “inseparable from its constituency” (Domínguez Rubio, 2014, p. 628), is fully applicable.

The first operation before accessioning the artwork into the museum’s inventory is to classify its components and distribute them among various physical locations and, more importantly, among value-based categories that separate the ‘art’ from the ‘non-art’ (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). The classification principle has traditionally been the ‘aesthetic value’ that characterises artworks, and those elements of the ‘artwork constituency’ that possess this value become a part of the museum collection, falling under the supervision of curators and conservators. Those that have been classified as ‘non-art’, but recognised to bear other values, such as research or legal value, are often placed in the museum archives, managed by archivists. The artwork’s ability to be classified and translated into the museum’s standards is crucial in order for it to be included in the processes related to the circulation of information and coordination of inter-institutional actions. According to Domínguez Rubio, this categorisation emerged partly thanks to the physical properties of conventional artworks understood as objects – especially paintings. As a result, the categories have proved controversial in the case of other less object-centred artworks, in particular contemporary artworks.

These processes of classification and valorisation are explained and analysed here through the example of the work of Danish artist Danh Vo, as collected by three large-scale museums. The case study is structured in three parts: firstly, in order to contextualise the investigation, the artist, his practice and the artwork are introduced in detail; secondly, both are located and analysed within the framework of museum practices; and thirdly, the data gathered and the analysis conducted are summarised.

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189 Usually archivists are employed only by large-scale institutions. In small museums there might be no separate position created for this purpose. More information about the structure of museum archives is featured in Chapter 5.
and assessed. The first section presents the investigation into the nature of the artwork in question, as its origin and entangled career offer insights into Vo’s artistic approaches that contextualise the piece. The section then goes on to present a group of the artist’s stories that reveal the artwork’s complexity and competing meanings. The second section starts by examining the artwork as the ‘object of conservation’ and by identifying its potential ‘artwork constituency’. It then moves on to present the collection-related documentation infrastructure of each of the museums, describing their relationship and collaboration with the artist, and ends with an analysis of their strategies applied to the artwork as a collectable. The third part theorises on the empirical findings and discusses their implications. This investigation proves that artists’ stories shape the identity of contemporary artworks and enable them to be understood, and as such it is equally important for museums to collect, care for and conserve them as it is for the art objects proper. Accordingly, the chapter proposes that a shift in the significance, value, and therefore status of artwork-related documentation within the museum structure is key for the successful conservation of contemporary artworks. Furthermore, it suggests that this can be accomplished by including the artwork’s documentation alongside the art object in the museum collection.

3.2 Artists’ Stories, Artworks’ Stories: Intertwined carriers and the notion of project

One of the keys for interpreting Vo’s art is his tangled life story. Danh Vo (1975) spent his early childhood on the Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc where his family of South Vietnamese origin was brought due to the advance of the armies of the North. After the fall of Saigon, Vo’s family fled Vietnam on a boat built by the artist’s father (McDonough, 2016). While attempting to reach America, they were rescued by a Danish cargo ship and sent to a refugee camp in Singapore. Vo’s family applied for

190 While commenting on the role of Vo’s personal stories in his work, art critic Nora Taylor (2012) points at the similarities to Beuys’s accounts on his Crimean adventure (see: Chapter 2, p. 94). When asked about the use of these stories as a kind of mythology parallel to that of Beuys, he responded: “I think that whether or not I used my biography in my work, my work would be read in relation to my personal history, so I anticipated this when I wove it into my work. Beuys created his story and then made work out of it, that is one difference between our practices” (Chaillou, 2011, para. 16).
asylum in Denmark, where the artist grew up and started his art studies (Taylor, 2012). However, the beginnings of his artistic career are to be found in Germany, where he continued his education, had his first exhibition and finally set up his studio. Nowadays, Vo sees himself “as a container that has inherited these infinite traces of history without inheriting any direction” (Robecchi, 2012, para. 2), and each of his available biographies refers to a different current place of residence, from Basel to New York and Mexico City.\footnote{191}

To help us approach works of art in line with the definition of contemporary art provided in Chapter 1 (see: p. 25) – i.e. as one complex entity represented by different art objects – this section introduces the notion of the ‘art project’ understood as one of the contemporary strategies in art making. Although, as Claire Bishop has remarked, the term ‘project’ was in use among conceptual artists already in the late 1960s, back then it was mostly understood in a similar way to in architecture: as a proposal for an artwork (Bishop, 2012). However, since the 1990s art projects slowly developed into an art form in their own right and started to replace the work of art as a finite object with an “open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form” (Bishop, 2012, p. 194). As Johnnie Gratton and Mark Sheringham observe in the introductory essay to their study on French contemporary art, in many projects the process is related to a strong investigative impulse reflecting concerns of a sociological or anthropological nature. Such projects, in line with the notion of ‘ethnographic turn’ as coined by Hal Foster, consist of site-specific (or site-sensitive) cultural research projects that “shift our attention from art to life, from the

\footnote{191 For more details on Vo’s biography see e.g.: Brinson, 2018; McDonough, 2016.}

aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic, and from the personal to the collective” (Gratton & Sheringham, 2005, p. 2). The result made available to the viewer is often an account or record of the course of the project, a material confirmation of the project as a process. Its end (or side) product is not dependent on the successfulness of the project; it can represent its failure or unpredicted development. Furthermore, the final outcome may be less important than the process itself, as the project is “a device designed not to achieve a particular end, but to allow something unforeseen to happen” (Gratton & Sheringham, 2005). Although by nature the term ‘project’ is linked to the present and oriented towards the future, it may be used to describe a completed undertaking. However, to apply this term retrospectively it is necessary to recognise within its outcome the trace of a now-past present and now-past future. It is also important to acknowledge that many final products are not actually final, but ‘works in progress’, as the result is, above all, ‘the project’ (Gratton & Sheringham, 2005).

The term ‘ethnographic turn’ was coined in art criticism and art history in reference to Hal Foster’s seminal essay The artist as ethnographer?, in which he speaks about contemporary artistic practices that exhibit significant similarities with anthropology and ethnographic research in the way they theorise cultural dissimilarities and issues of representation (Rutten, van Dienderen, & Soetaert, 2013). See: Foster, 1995.
The art project that resulted in the artwork presented in this chapter was carried out mostly during the five-month residency that Vo carried out at Kadist Art Foundation in Paris in 2009, and consists of the arrangement of a loan and later purchase of chandeliers from a Parisian hotel originally called the Hôtel Majestic. The setting as the site of competing memories is key to the concept of the piece. The hotel opened in 1908 but was only used for its original function until 1936, when the French government acquired it and transformed it into the offices of the French Ministry of Defence. During the Nazi occupation of Paris, it served as the centre of operations of the high command of the German Military Administration, and in that period it witnessed the planning of the mass killing of Parisian Jews, as well as preparations for the assassination of Hitler. After the war, the former hotel hosted the headquarters of UNESCO, before it was again transformed into the International Conference Centre of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. During that period the former ballroom was used as a site for negotiating peace treaties in many international conflicts, including the Paris Peace Accords, and subsequently the

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194 Kadist is a non-profit contemporary art organization with an international contemporary art collection that hosts artist’s residencies and produces exhibitions, publications, and public events. It has two locations, one in Paris and one in San Francisco. For more information see: http://kadist.org/about/.

nine-point plan aimed at guaranteeing lasting peace in Vietnam in 1973, as well as peace consultations over Kosovo and the Ivory Coast (Lebovici, 2015).

Bearing in mind Vo’s family history, one can assume that the event that attracted the artist’s attention to the former Hôtel Majestic was the signing of the documents that were supposed to conclude the Vietnam War. Vo recalls the moment he first saw photographs of the setting of these peace negotiations in a letter published in the press release of the first presentation of the piece: “In the photo there were people sitting in a circle, like in an arena, discussing the future of Vietnam. Above the arena, the chandeliers of the ballroom were hanging and lighting up the negotiation table” (Kadist Art Foundation, 2009, p. 3). The year before the start of Vo’s residency in Paris, the French government sold the former Hôtel Majestic to a private investor who started a general refurbishment of the building, which allowed Vo first to borrow and later to buy the chandeliers and subsequently convert them into an artwork. The chandeliers purchased from the new owner of the historic building were assigned separate titles. The first one, entitled 16:32:15–26.05.2009, was displayed at the end of Vo’s residency at Kadist Art Foundation’s exhibition space. A couple of months later the second one, 08:03:51, 28.05.2009, was presented as a part of Vo’s solo exhibition in Basel. The fall of

196 In fact, a total of four chandeliers were purchased. As this dissertation pertains strictly to the framework of museum practices, the fourth chandelier, originating from a space adjacent to the ballroom and sold to a private collector (Ishikawa Foundation), will be left outside the scope of the research.


2009 witnessed the display of the third one, 26.05.2009, 8:43, this time in Berlin. By the time my own research began, all three chandeliers had been purchased by or donated to the collections of major museums: Centre Pompidou, Denmark’s Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) and MoMA. Building on the distinction between the artwork and the art object, and in reference to the notion of the art project as presented above, in this chapter the artwork that resulted from the art project will be called the ‘Chandeliers Project’, while each of the three chandeliers will be referred to by its title. Technically speaking, all three artefacts are classic late-19th-century brass chandeliers decorated with glass chains and prisms. They were designed from the outset to be electrified; therefore, instead of candles, they are equipped with incandescent bulbs mounted on so-called ‘candle tubes’ made of compressed cardboard painted white. The chandeliers’ dimensions vary – the originally central one is the largest and most complex in terms of decoration, while the two side ones are considerably smaller.

While conceived less than a decade ago, Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ has already been presented in numerous exhibition spaces and in a variety of different ways. This variability of installation options raises questions regarding strategies for future display and, accordingly, presents conservation challenges that will be introduced in the following section. Between 2009 and 2016 each of the three chandeliers was exhibited in multiple shows and venues. The largest one, entitled 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 and acquired later on by SMK, was shown for the first time hanging from the ceiling in the very centre of a vast, nearly empty exhibition hall of the Kunsthalle Basel (Figure 35). While the light bulbs were not switched on, the sunlight filtering into the room through the glass roof and reflecting off the prisms as they swayed with the space’s air

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200 There are discrepancies between the way the titles of the chandeliers are written out, even within a single institution. While on the MoMA website the chandelier is tilted 08:43, 26.05 (2009), in the Object File it is identified as 26.05.2009, 8:43. For the purpose of this text, I have chosen to use the titles according to the official documentation of each of the museums.

201 The empirical part of this research ended in 2017. In 2018 there were two subsequent exhibitions featuring the chandeliers, which will not be analysed in this study.


flow in a sense rendered the artefact ‘lit up’. In the next two consecutive displays, one at SMK and the other at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Figure 36-37), the same chandelier was presented hanging not from the ceiling but from an industrial metal gantry, its base dangling just above the floor.203 The chain and the rosette that usually covers the hook from which the lamp dangles, both useless in this case, were displayed separately, laid out on the floor behind the gantry. The last two shows featuring 08:03:51, 28.05.2009, organised in 2015 and 2016 in Mexico and Venice, respectively, presented the piece once again suspended from the ceiling (Figure 38-39).204 In both cases, the arrangement broke with traditional rules of symmetry by placing the chandelier in a corner (Mexico) or next to the stairs (Venice).

The piece entitled 26.05.2009, 8:43, acquired in 2010 by MoMA, was from the outset exhibited disassembled and arranged on the floor in pieces. In the Berlin show, the small components were placed on white and grey sheets of cloth, and the chandelier’s core was fixed to a wooden transport pallet (Figure 40).205 Some of the glass parts on display were wrapped up, creating an overall sensation akin to the unpacking phase prior to an art show. Since then, the artefact has always been displayed in this dismembered form. In the next show, held at MoMA, the number of pieces of cloth was reduced and the arrangement of the elements changed significantly, while the presentation of the chandelier’s core remained similar (Figure 41),206 For the exhibition hosted by

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203 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 was displayed for the first time at SMK shortly after the accession to the collection, as a part of the ongoing series of presentations of newly acquired works.


the Musée d’Art Moderne, the chandelier was arranged on the floor in a dark room inaccessible to the public. This time, the light bulbs were lit and the pieces of cloth and wrapping materials removed (Figure 42).

The last chandelier, 16:32:15–26.05.2009, was shown for the first time in the exhibition organised by Kadist Art Foundation at the end of Vo’s residency. The artefact was split in two, separating the core and the lower part, and suspended from a transportation rack, of a different type than the gantry used at SMK (Figure 43). After the show, the piece was purchased by American collectors Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner. In 2013, together with the other two chandeliers, it was displayed at Paris’s Musée d’Art Modern, this time in a different manner (Figure 44). The core was presented inside a wooden transport crate open on one side so as to resemble a display case. The light was turned on so that the bulbs illuminated the inside of the crate with a warm glow. The lower part of the chandelier, also lit, was suspended inside scaffolding. In 2015 the Whitney Museum of American Art showed the chandelier assembled and suspended from the ceiling in a corner of the gallery (Figure 45). This last show was linked to the donation of an important part of the Wagners’ collection to the Whitney and Pompidou. Vo’s work was donated to the French institution, and just after the show at the Whitney it was presented again in Paris. This time the chandelier was installed similarly as at Kadist, divided in two and suspended on the transportation rack, with only one difference – this time the lights were switched off (Figure 46).

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207 Ibidem, Exhibition Go Mo Ni Ma Da.
208 Ibidem p. 6, Exhibition Les Fleurs d’intérieur.
209 Ibidem p. 8, Exhibition Go Mo Ni Ma Da.

Although from a traditional conservation perspective all three art objects seem to be rather conventional and stable, their separate careers and multifarious presentations raise the question of whether the way of displaying each of the chandeliers is ‘meaningful’ for the readability and understanding of the piece. This question becomes more relevant in the course of my own investigation carried in SMK’s archive, which holds a loan request for 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 received from an influential European art institution. The application is illustrated with the photograph of one of the manifestations of the chandelier owned by MoMA – dismantled on the gallery floor – and the requester is asking whether it would be possible to present the piece from SMK in the same way. Since the loan was rejected due to prior arrangements with other institutions, the question remained open. The story of this unfulfilled loan triggered a doubt regarding possible ways of installing the artefact: is there any ‘right’

way to show each of the chandeliers? While today the easiest manner to approach this issue would be by consulting the artist, who will make this choice – and how – when Vo is no longer available? And accordingly, what kind of information is indispensable in order to allow the artwork’s future keepers to make an informed decision in this regard?

3.3 Questioning Museums, Objects and Space: The ‘Chandeliers Project’ within Vo’s artistic practice

What is the ‘Chandeliers Project’ about? As art historian and curator Yilmaz Dziewior has aptly observed, the networks of references that entangle each of Vo’s artistic projects “open up means of understanding which frequently lead into a labyrinth of interpretations”, and Vo’s formally attractive, albeit enigmatic objects defy simple explanations (Dziewior, 2016, p. 25). In the literature, the ‘Chandeliers Project’ is commonly explained through the figure of the ‘silent’ or ‘mute witness’ to historical events that have been decisive for Vo’s life (Fassi, 2010, p. 154; Hergott, 2014, p. 6), a trope which originates from the artist himself. According to art critic Magali Arriola, removing the chandeliers from their context in order to place them in an art setting echoes the act of musealisation, and as such elicits a creative dialogue with the concept of cultural or historical heritage and turns the idea of the imperial trophy on its head (Arriola, 2016).

If the ‘Chandeliers Project’ engages in a dialogue with the concepts of museum and heritage, it might be potentially positioned within the framework of institutional critique understood as an artistic strategy, and this contextualisation can be supported with examples of how Vo has worked with various institutional partners. Three examples of Vo’s collaborations with art institutions reveal how he understands, explores and handles relationships with museums and how his artworks/projects might

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'behave' upon entering the institutional realm. Additionally, they expose the process-based character of Vo's work, how this processuality unfolds within the museum walls, and how it relates to its object-based representation. This section demonstrates the significance of examining a particular artwork through the study of the artist’s practices and strategies, and reveals that the way an artist sanctions other works influences the understanding of the artwork in question. It likewise shows the value of the stories that carry these sanctions for conservation-oriented research, and proposes that as such they too might be seen as a part of the ‘artwork constituency’.

In 2010 The Walker Art Center acquired Vo's work entitled *Tombstone for Phùng Vo* (2010), which is simultaneously a sculpture and a real tombstone. It consists of a black granite slab with an engraved, gilded inscription. Upon the purchase, the piece was installed in the Sculpture Garden – an outdoor museum gallery. The acquisition contract states that after the death of the artist's father, Phùng Vo, the stone will be shipped to Denmark and placed over his grave in the cemetery in Copenhagen (B. Ryan, 2012).

In return, the museum will receive four artefacts that belonged to the deceased: a gold chain with a crucifix, a Rolex watch, a Dupont lighter, and a fake American military-academy ring. Once the tombstone has been installed in Denmark, neither the Vo family nor the Walker Art Center will have any obligation to

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214 In an interview with Vo, Walker curator Bartholomew Ryan describes how the museum perceived the process of accessioning the artwork by drawing attention to the absurdity of the contractual language: "We, as a museum were almost, I wouldn't say forced but sort of required, that your father makes a will [...] a tangible document that confirms this conceptual agreement. So basically your father is working right now on a will for us which confirms all of these aspects" (Ryan, 2011, 17:10').

215 These three objects – a Rolex watch, a Dupont lighter, and a fake American military-academy ring – used to be a part of another piece by Vo entitled *If You Were to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow* (2005). The latter consisted of items produced in the context of Western culture that were a status symbol and represented a vision of masculinity in 1970s Vietnam (Fassi, 2010). To make things still more complicated, these three objects are not the original ones acquired by Vo's father upon his arrival in Europe, but their 'updated versions' (B. Ryan, 2012). Art historian Élisabeth Lebovici relates that "the artist paid his father an amount for these possessions equal to the cost of 'upgraded versions', which Vo Senior subsequently acquired. Phung still owns the second versions and wears the watch and ring daily. In 2011, he signed a will with his wife, Hao Nguyen, as witness, bequeathing those second, updated items to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis upon the return of his grave marker to Copenhagen. The grave marker is a work in the Walker Collection, *Tombstone for Phung* (2010), acquired in 2011. It will be exchanged for Phung's current watch, lighter, and ring upon the will's probation" (Lebovici, 2015, n.p.).
ensure its maintenance; rather, it will be taken care of for as long as there is someone who wishes to do so (B. Ryan, 2011). According to Ryan, the piece can be seen as “a performance scripted by a series of documents – the contract, the will, export papers, etc. – that enacts itself over many years and involves many players, from Vo family and Walker staff members to the lawyer whose expertise was needed to ensure the purchase and anyone else who finds out about the work and becomes engaged with it over time” (B. Ryan, 2012, para. 5).

Another example of Vo’s strategy of engaging in a discourse with museum practices and the traditional notion of artworks’ authenticity is the case of a prominent work entitled *Death Sentence* (2009), which belongs to the MoMA collection. The artwork consists of sixty sheets of paper with handwritten excerpts from English and French literary and historical sources addressing death and commemoration. The passages were compiled by the artist’s friend, Julie Ault, and written down by the artist’s father, a skilled calligrapher (Lynch, 2011). In 2017 the piece was requested for a loan by a major American museum that was preparing a retrospective of Vo’s work, and the artist decided to display it in a space where the lighting surpassed acceptable conservation conditions. In order to fulfil the plan, an exhibition copy had to be made, which is a common practice in such cases. Typically exhibition copies are produced by scanning and printing, which thanks to technological advances can be highly accurate in visual terms. However, the artist claimed that it was conceptually important for him that the same amount of time, labour and effort be applied to the displayed version as to the original one. Vo proposed that his father make the new display copies in exactly the same way that he had made the original, namely by hand copying, and subsequently the artwork was remade, or rather re-performed. Nevertheless, as the original work was acquired as a ‘unique piece’, this ‘remake’ had to be referred to as a ‘copy’.

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216 The story of the loan of *Death Sentence* originates from the interview conducted by the author with Christian Rattemeyer, the Harvey S. Shipley Miller Associate Curator in the Department of Drawings at MoMA (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017).
The third demonstration of Vo’s unorthodox dealings with museums is an exhibition organised by the SMK in 2012. The show featured the project We the People, for which the artist fabricated a full-scale replica of the Statue of Liberty in approximately 250 sheets of copper. There were only a handful of pieces on display an any given time for one simple reason – each of them is a large sculpture in its own right. Moreover, Vo never intended to show all the parts together; on the contrary, from the outset the idea was to spread them all around the world. At the time of the opening of the exhibition in Copenhagen, the project was still ongoing, and having the pieces manufactured in China presented a challenge to the galleries representing the artist in terms of shipping and storage — a problem solved by the SMK exhibition itself. The largest gallery in the SMK building was converted into a storage and shipping centre. The pieces were constantly moved around and replaced – while some were arriving, others were sent to their new owners or to other display venues, and the institution acted as a facilitator of this exchange.

All three examples shed new light on how we might read the ‘Chandeliers Project’. They show that Vo’s work exists in a continuous dialogue with his other works and practices, with architectural and conceptual spaces, and, as in all the cases presented above, with the key notions of the traditional museum, such as authenticity, collection and display. By challenging museum rules and procedures, his projects might be seen

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217 Exhibition We the People (Detail), 1 June 2012 – 31 December 2013, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. For more information about the show see: We the People (Detail). Retrieved December 21, 2017, from: http://www.smk.dk/en/visit-the-museum/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2013/we-the-people-detail/.

218 For a detailed description of the project see: Thatcher, 2013.

219 The story of the exhibition We the People (Detail) originates from the interview conducted by the author with SMK curator Marianne Torp (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017).

220 The artist described the concept of the display at SMK as follows: “One of the best destinations for We The People was the National Gallery of Denmark. They wanted the project so much that they had to start thinking how to get around the bureaucracy. So they proposed to host the project as a storage space for two years. Otherwise, I would have – together with the galleries – needed to find a storage space when certain pieces were not being exhibited. In 1995 the museum built an extension with a gigantic atrium for sculpture. But there was always something wrong with this space, so it never really functioned. And that was the space they offered for us to use. It is these kinds of things that made the project so interesting because it was bending rules. The whole institution had to rethink its role and be creative.” (Thatcher, 2013, p. 3)
as a playful and humorous form of institutional critique supported by institutions themselves. The three stories demonstrate as well that despite being object-based, Vo’s work has a performative character. His objects are never static: “they move, transmute, perform, and are performed; they insist on their own status as both matter and energy” (Fassi, 2010, p. 157). Should the variable manifestations of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ be considered as a form of toying with the constraints of the museum realm as well? And if so, how can this conceptual property be preserved for the future?

Besides being performative, Vo’s objects are also imbued with a Benjaminian ‘aura’. Their origins, provenance and history are as important as their form, function and appearance. As such, they demand that we approach them as unique, historical objects – evidence of the past. The importance of the original chandeliers, as well as the artistic gesture of altering their form by partitioning and disassembling them, is more explicit when seen in comparison with Vo’s other projects, such as the seminal work Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs (2013). It consists of furniture given to US Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara by Jacqueline Kennedy, and subsequently bought by the artist at auction. Vo shows them dismembered, with their wooden frames taken apart, their upholstery removed and the leather that originally covered the chairs’ seats hanging on the wall so as to resemble a “freshly peeled animal pelt” (Godfrey, 2016, p. 199). These objects, such as chairs or chandeliers, at once ordinary and unique, might be framed within the Duchampian tradition of the readymade. What makes them different is the importance of their specific heritage, or in other words, their condition as evidence. The gesture of de-contextualising and disassembling is a significant artistic strategy that renders these objects visible, or, applying the rhetorical trope of prosopopeia, makes them speak. As Arriola puts it, “by dissecting these elements, scattering their parts and then exhibiting some of these in display cases as if they were relics, Vo not only reveals the latent fragility of the objects on which power rested [...] but also the inevitable vulnerability of the people who used and instrumentalised them” (Arriola, 2016, p. 187).

The last essential trait that characterises Vo’s practice is the notion of space, which is important for understanding the artist’s approach to display and key to scrutinising the variable presentations of ‘Chandeliers Project’. Vo curates shows, not only exhibitions of his own works but also those presenting artists that are in some way
important for him.\textsuperscript{221} He employs non-traditional distributions of artworks, paying as much attention to relationships between the pieces exhibited as to individual objects and conceptualising the ensemble.\textsuperscript{222} Moreover, the artist repeatedly plays with the architecture or against it by filling small spaces with bulky objects while leaving the large spaces almost void.\textsuperscript{223} The conceptualisation of the exhibition space in Vo’s practice takes place on several levels, as for him artist’s talks, interviews and catalogues represent further alternative spaces for the presentation of his work. Accordingly, the stories communicated through these media can be seen as further manifestations of artworks. He describes this concept as follows:

I put effort into publications about my work like catalogues, or even interviews and articles, because I also perceive them in terms of space and want to think about how we can use these spaces. An interview may be a space where I am providing a lot of information, but I don’t necessarily see it as a separate thing. I try to see what fits where […]. (Maerkle, 2011, para. 2)

\textsuperscript{221} Vo has curated several shows of artists whose work is of particular interest to him, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, but also group shows where he has included his own work, such as the transhistorical exhibition \textit{Slip of the Tongue} at Punta Della Dogana in 2015. An important exhibition to mention in this context is also \textit{I M U U R 2}, which took place in 2012 at the Guggenheim Museum in NY, in which Vo filled the space of the gallery with a personal collection of artefacts and artworks by Martin Wong, a Chinese-American artist who died of AIDS in 1999.

\textsuperscript{222} Curator and art historian Mark Godfrey summarized Vo’s practice as exhibition maker by stating that: “Many artists and curators, when arranging an installation of separate works, concentrate on formal juxtaposition (one thing near another looking like it, or made of something similar). Vo, whose exhibitions include hunks of copper, piles of driftwood, chandeliers, copied letters, gilded cardboard boxes, archival documents, photogravures of found photographs, or even works by other artists, instead thinks more about how the ideas unleashed by an object might charge the encounter with another object nearby”. (Godfrey, 2016, p. 197). Vo himself summarizes his exhibition-making as follows: “I don’t consider my exhibitions empty; on the contrary, I think they are massive and intrusive. The space between carries a lot of meaning. The absence of space is also significant” (Godfrey, 2016, p. 195).

In line with this approach, one of the alternative ‘exhibition spaces’ for the ‘Chandeliers Project’ is the publication entitled *HIC SVNT LEONES* launched for the exhibition held at Kunsthalle Basel in 2009 (Vo & Ault, 2009). It is not a catalogue in the traditional sense but rather an artist’s book authored by Vo together with Julie Ault, who describes this collaboration as more akin to co-curating than co-editing (Vo & Ault, 2010). The similarity between the book and the exhibition space starts already with the cover – entirely white, with no title or authors’ names whatsoever – clearly resembling the concept of the white cube. Instead of photographs of artworks, the book contains images documenting processes through which the artworks were made or illustrating related events and stories. Interpretative texts are replaced by press clippings and at first glance unrelated essays by various authors, for instance, Emil Cioran and Pier Paolo Pasolini. While the content’s structure mimics a common curatorial strategy of ‘thematic universes’, the description of the images and the sources of the texts are provided only at the end of the catalogue in a form akin to wall labels. As Ault observes, unlike traditional art exhibition publications, “what happens with this catalogue is that [...] this is a kind of reverse of giving information” (Vo & Ault, 2010).

Based on this study of Vo’s artistic practice, we may now draw substantial conclusions as to the multidimensionality of the ‘Chandeliers Project’. We have seen potential challenges related to framing the project as collectable and approaching its possible future manifestations. Firstly, Vo’s artworks/projects have a high degree of performativity and from the outset should be regarded as such. Secondly, by toying with its rules and constraints, he often uses the museum – as a concept and as an institution – as a point of reference, which could be a significant aspect to take into account when designing display strategies for his pieces. Thirdly, the authenticity of objects incorporated by Vo and their creative transformations are highly important for understanding his work. Fourthly, the artist is interested in display space as a medium, and while curating his own shows he meticulously builds conceptual relationships


225 As for the ‘Chandeliers Project’, the catalogue contains, for example, photographs illustrating the signing ceremony of the peace accords at the former Hôtel Majestic (p. 7) and the last photograph taken before the renovation of the ballroom (p. 19). See: Vo, D., & Ault, J. (2009). *HIC SVNT LEONES*. (A. Szymczyk, Ed.). Basel: Kunsthalle Basel.
between exhibited objects. Even though the presented stories and opinions still do not offer a straight path to follow while deciding on the future installations of each of the chandeliers, they help to identify particular issues that can be traced in the next step of the research. Moreover, they provide a basis for interpreting the artist’s opinions—which is the direction this study will follow.

3.4 Artists’ Sanctions, Artists’ Stories: Giving objects a voice

Up to a certain point in his career Vo granted many interviews and so-called ‘artist’s talks’, and appeared eager to explain his work to the public. Many of them can be accessed online – video and audio recorded or published in journals and magazines. In line with the idea of an expanded, conceptual exhibition space that includes catalogues and different kinds of artist’s utterances, both textual and verbal, this section presents how Vo has used some of these ‘alternative displays’ for presenting and explaining the ‘Chandeliers Project’. It is structured in three parts: the first one presents stories that shed new light on the conceptual underpinnings of the artwork, the second gathers and analyses the artist’s thoughts about variable arrangements of the chandeliers on display, and the third gathers together statements demonstrating his concerns for the open-ended nature of his works. The excerpts from Vo’s statements reveal how the information provided by the artist is structured and communicated and prove its importance for the reading of the work as well as for future approaches to its presentation.

As Vo relates it in various interviews, the artwork took shape the day he took his father to see the ballroom of the former Hôtel Majestic:

My dad visited me in France. I took a cab with my dad to the hotel before they took down the chandeliers. Of course, he was cursing and swearing

\[226\] This attitude changed when Vo’s carrier started to gain speed. In an article from 2014 he was already named ‘the Salinger of the art world’ in reference to notoriously reclusive American writer J.D. Salinger known for rejecting any form of commenting on his work (Knott, 2014).

\[227\] The same story is recounted in writings by others who have interviewed Vo; see e.g.: Maerkle, 2011; N. A. Taylor, 2015.
during the cab ride – and talking about going to the room of death. [...] You can see that the chandelier was designed for the room, so it’s quite spectacular. (Statens Museum for Kunst, 2012)

[...] when he entered the room, and that for me was really what formulated the project he could only say: oh my God, Danh I think that the Queen of Denmark must have one of these in her home, and I thought that was what the project was about, that this object is about when you enter the room you leave all your sorrows behind. This is what it was created for. And this is what its function is, basically. And whatever comes after that is secondary, I think. This person that was really attached to the history of such a thing, would think of the Queen of Denmark. What does that really mean? I don’t know really how do you mediate such things. (Vo & Ault, 2010)

Yet, besides acting as ‘silent witnesses’ or the evidence of historical events – the interpretation featured in the literature – there is another, seemingly opposing reading of the chandeliers, namely as artefacts designed for enjoyment: objects that ‘make you forget things’ even if these ‘things’ are formative for one’s biography.

The chandelier as a decorative piece that astonishes and the story behind the way the artwork took on this meaning is also reflected in the titles given to each of the artefacts. As Vo has stated:

You come into this magnificent room. And ballrooms are of course designed for that. To make you forget. And I thought – that was the piece. And that was why I wanted ... just this moment ... for each piece, the number [the title] is a date and time of the disassembling of it. And nothing else (Tapia O., 2017).

Another conceptual dimension of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ is related to the circumstances in which the undertaking unfolded, and that story positions the artwork within the discourses on the value of heritage in the global economy. In an interview conducted recently by Clare Molloy for Kadist Art Foundation, Vo explained that the process of purchasing the chandeliers and all the actors involved in it are significant for the reading of the piece:
[...] they [the chandeliers] have of course like a historical element that attracted me, but I think if that was only the thing, then I don’t think it would be such an interesting artwork. I think also it had the story of [...] the sale of it, the finances around this circumstances [...]. (Tapia O., 2017, '6:43)

The story of the sale of the Hôtel Majestic as a significant motif of the artwork was already evoked in the catalogue to the Basel exhibition in a rather unorthodox and indirect way. The entire page 11 of the book is composed of fragments of a New York Times article describing the massive sale of historic properties by the French government (Vo & Ault, 2009). The story was presented again during the public talk at the MoMA in an expanded version, with more details and new threads:

The French government [...] they didn’t have money to maintain the historical buildings, so they, as many other countries, are selling out their buildings. And in Paris, the first interested buyers in these historical buildings are Americans, Arabs and the Chinese of course. [...] And the Qatar family. We found out that they actually own the building. Then you think, they are spending the oil money, because it is going to run out, in reinvesting in real estate. [...] What their problem is, that they don’t want to have any public notion that they are using oil money on buying a historical building and then dismantle it. But we found furthermore out that, because they are only investing in real estate, so they leased out the buildings that they are buying, and the one who was interested in it was [...] the Shanghai and Hong Kong Hotel Group (Vo & Ault, 2010).

In a recent article about Vo, art critic Calvin Tomkins reveals another backstage story related to the sale of the chandeliers, which can be interpreted in line with Vo’s approaches questioning the structure of the art world and its institutions. Tomkins reports that it was the sale of 26.05.2009, 8:43 to MoMA that allowed Vo to finalise the transaction with the owner of the former hotel: “I sold it before I bought it, Vo said, gleefully” (Tomkins, 2018).
As the above-cited excerpts show, Vo is rather open to talk about the backstage of his projects, and that includes his choices concerning variable options for presenting the chandeliers. While none of Vo’s remarks on this topic provides instructions per se, all are enlightening for decisions to be taken in the future. When art critic Timothée Chaillou asked the artist why he dismantled one of the chandeliers for the Parisian show, the artist explained his interest in experimenting and the circumstantial character of his choices:

I like to try different methods of installing a work each time it is shown, if it’s possible, and if it makes sense. I really liked the way the chandelier looked at the Musée d’Art Moderne, spread out on the floor and lit up. The other chandeliers were borrowed from individuals and institutions and came with the support systems used in the exhibition. There was less flexibility with those, but the concept behind the exhibition was to have them come together again in Paris, after they had travelled and been exhibited in different museums around the world; the idea was not necessarily to play with their components. (Chaillou, 2013)

The same issue was addressed and explained during the public talk at MoMA. A member of the audience raised a question about whether the different ways of arranging the chandeliers on view carry additional layers of meanings. Vo responded as follows:

Actually, I am much more practically oriented. [...] It is very difficult, you have to imagine that the biggest chandelier is probably four meters, and really wide. Chandeliers are not meant to travel, they are not meant to be disassembled. What I initially tried to do was to understand with these objects how you actually can display them, so I must admit that I was actually just testing things out. And then it creates meaning. And people project meaning in it. (Vo & Ault, 2010)

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228 “Are you not trying to impart something by virtue of how you lay out the chandelier or display the chandeliers in those three exhibitions?” (“Danh Vo in conversation with Julie Ault,” 2010).
Besides referring to the physical way the chandeliers might be arranged on display, various statements present Vo’s opinion about their conceptual framing and contextualisation. During the MoMA talk, Vo admitted that from the outset he had struggled with the idea of producing a mere art object, which for him is equal to a ‘cultural souvenir’, and affirmed that he did not want to make a piece that directly referred to “his personal fetish about these artefacts” (Vo & Ault, 2010). Vo stated that overcoming this concern was also conditioned by his father’s response upon visiting the ballroom: “I have a neurosis about enclosing objects but he really opened it up, he made the object contradictory and made me think” (Maerkle, 2011, para. 7).

Although Vo fosters the ‘mysteriousness’ of his objects and favours instinctive interpretations and meanings prompted by the location and context (Godfrey, 2016), he is aware that the anecdotes linked to his biography have become a leitmotif of his oeuvre and the lens through which it is analysed. At a certain point, his strategy of turning personal stories into the epicentre of his work became incompatible with his wish to allow the public to construct their own understanding of the objects on display. The following excerpts represent his helplessness in the face of this issue and his struggles with finding possible solutions:

I am not interested in imposing meaning on certain objects. I would like to give a possibility to the meaning embedded in these objects, we all are taking part in negotiating the meaning of it. One has to understand that under this chandelier the Ivory Coast peace was negotiated, the Kosovo peace was negotiated. That was a lot of events under this kind of things. And what can be worse than a typical artistic position in occupying the meaning? I felt that that was the problem. I felt that I personally had to deal with it in a certain way. And it is, of course, a bit paradoxical because on the one hand I probably subconsciously had one set. [...] This is something I guess I have to understand better. When time comes. (Vo & Ault, 2010)

Besides interviews, talks and catalogues, another way of sanctioning the reading of an artwork is through the information provided on display, and Vo often ‘curates’ this aspect of his exhibitions as well. Already during the first presentation of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ at Kadist, the pieces on display were accompanied by an extraordinary wall label in the form of a brass plaque designed and produced by the
artist. With time it became a regular practice of Vo’s, and brass plaques started to appear in subsequent exhibitions. Although provided by the artist together with the actual piece, they rarely receive much attention in the literature and have hardly ever appear in the exhibitions’ visual documentation. However, there are some exceptions – the brass plaque produced for one of the exhibitions that featured the *Tombstone for Phùng Vo* (2010) was acquired as a part of the artwork by Walker Art Centre. In the case of the ‘Chandeliers Project’, the information on the brass plaques is not fixed and depends on both the chandelier and the setting. The differences are minor but result in a shift in the emphasis from one aspect of the work to another, or, in other words, from one story to another. Vo explains his approach to the use of the plaques and the control over the contextual information in an interview conducted recently by Clare Molloy for Kadist Art Foundation:

**CM:** Is it the first time that you are using one of those plaques? Can you explain what those plaques are? You’ve used them since.

**DV:** For me, the work has a lot of meaning, but I don’t believe you can impose them on the other person, and I love the idea that, as an audience [when] you came you were strange to what you were seeing. I thought there is a certain beauty in that because that is a reality, and really from the very

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The text on the brass plaque that accompanied the chandelier during the exhibition at Kadist reads:

16:32:15 - 26.05.2009 / Chandelier from the former Hotel Majestic, avenue Kleber
Hosted: Headquarters of the German military government, UNESCO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris Peace Accords, negotiations on Kosovo, Ivory Coast and a long list of international issues. Recently sold by the State in 2007. [Courtesy Kadist Art Foundation]

The one made for the exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof shifts the importance away from the signing of documents aiming to end the Vietnam war and over to other peace negotiations held in the ballroom, but also recalls the circumstances of the sale of the building:

26.05.2009, 8:43, 2009

Late 19th century chandelier from the ballroom of the former Hotel Majestic, Avenue Kleber, Paris. The hotel functioned as the headquarters for the German Military Administration during the occupation of France in World War II. It then hosted UNESCO before becoming the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the site of the signing ceremony known as Paris Peace Accords and subsequently the nine-point plan aimed at guaranteeing the lasting peace in Vietnam in 1973. The building also hosted peace negotiations on Kosovo, Ivory Coast and a list of other international conflicts. After being sold, it is now the future location of the first Peninsula Hotel in Europe. [Retrieved from: http://bortolozzi.com/exhibitions/danh-vo-preisder-nationalgalerie-fur-junge-kunst-hamburger-bahnhof-berlin/]
beginning, I didn’t believe in art as a bridging, I didn’t think that art should be a reconciliation of history. I think it should be this strangeness when you confront it, I think that is much more related to real life [...]. (Tapia O., 2017)

Although Vo’s works are rather hermetic and obscure for the broad public, especially when accompanied only by scarce description, Vo’s statements prove that ‘dispensing’ contextual information about his works is a part of his artistic strategy. Whereas in the first excerpt below, from 2011, Vo seems to still be experimenting with and contemplating this issue as a sort of challenge, the following excerpt, from 2015, demonstrates that with time his convictions hardened:

I believe that texts provide a key, as well as a title. In the end the Basel texts were just the captions for the works, with the titles and descriptions. It’s a balance that I’m working on – how much information do I actually give? There’s nothing new under the sun, it’s a strategy that has been used for a long time. It’s a way of emphasizing objects. It’s like Richard Prince. It’s “Untitled” with a title. That opens things up, and of course many artists have used it afterwards [...]. (Maerkle, 2011, para. 4)

I do not think that artists should be servants. You do your stuff and people have to be in alert to discover and look for it. That’s the job of the viewer, not my job. [...] I think it is a dialogue: my job is to do whatever I do and his [the viewer’s] job is to be aware and look. The art industry – and also education departments, texts and whatever – are treating viewers as stupid. And this makes people even more stupid. (Slow Words, 2015, para. 5)

Selected quotations from various interviews with and talks given by the artist point towards several issues related to the ‘Chandeliers Project’ that preoccupy Vo and that are recorded only in his statements. These accounts expose different layers of the artwork’s meanings, provide insights into the circumstances in which the project was conceived, and elucidate the artist’s motivation behind the diverse ways it can be presented, as well as his approach to providing information to the public. They not only contextualise the objects, but, more importantly, are what actually turns them into an artwork. Subsequent subchapters will offer a reflection on the importance of this information for the care of Vo’s works, as well as for designing and managing their possible futures.
3.5 Multifarious Ways of Musealising a Project

3.5.1 The ‘Object of Conservation’ and the ‘Artwork Constituency’

Dear Aga,

We have considered your request to pursue your research about collaboration with artists in the documentation of contemporary artworks within a museum collection, with a special focus on conservation [...]. The conservation needs of the Vo are minimal, as it is made up of inorganic materials that are stable in a museum environment. I cannot foresee much in the way of conservation treatment of this work. We are not involved with the installation documentation of this work so I don’t think I can be helpful to you. I did a quick search in Google images and I noted that there are variable ways to set this work up. [...] We can offer you the opportunity to make an appointment to review the [artwork’s] files. If you want to chat about the conservation of the inorganic materials which make up the sculpture, I will be happy to discuss them with you.230

The decision to open this new subchapter with this quote stems from the need to demonstrate that the concept of conservation as defined in the first chapter of this dissertation (see: Chapter 1, p. 81) is not necessarily common among museum professionals dealing with contemporary artworks. The variable modes of displaying each of the chandeliers that may in the future pose challenges, identified above as a key conservation problem, might understandably be considered by many not to be a conservation-related issue at all.231 Although the email cited at the beginning of this section suggests otherwise, the chandeliers do indeed present problems within the framework of traditionally understood material-based conservation, and the aim of this section is to demonstrate that even detailed technical queries related to the care of the chandeliers as artefacts cannot be solved without studying the artwork as a whole, and in consequence without careful research into the stories narrated by both the artist and the other parties involved in its career.

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230 Excerpt from an email received from a conservator at one of the institutions studied in the course of this research. Both the institution and the author of the email have consciously been kept anonymous.

231 See the discussions around the notion of conservation outlined in Chapter 1, p. 79.
Contrary to what is suggested in the above-cited email, each of the chandeliers, even when approached merely as a physical object, needs to be considered as a unique, irreplaceable chandelier with a particular history, not as brass, electrical wires, glass, cardboard or other inorganic or organic materials. Although two of the institutional keepers of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ still classify the piece as ‘a sculpture’, all three of them acknowledge the special character of the art object in the context of this particular artwork. In the imperishable category of ‘medium’ or ‘technique’ in the artwork’s tombstone information, all of the museums state that the piece is made of a ‘late 19th-century chandelier’. The implications of these taxonomies become evident when analysing the chandeliers through the lens of day-to-day practices related to collection care.

A common task for museum conservators is cleaning. While some objects arrive covered in different kinds of dirt at the time of accession to the collection, others, even though shown in controlled exhibition spaces, gather dust on display in the museum itself. For traditional sculptures, superficial dirt is undesirable and may disturb the aesthetic perception of the piece as intended by the artist. Dirt can also be a dangerous agent of decay, as it is a carrier of chemically reactive substances that can alter the appearance of the original surface. As a result, superficial dirt ought to be removed. However, the case of the chandeliers is different. The superficial dirt was accumulated throughout the Hôtel Majestic’s glory years, and forms part of the artefacts’ history. When the SMK conservator Louise Cone asked the artist about this issue directly, he said that he would prefer to keep the old dirt as a trace of history (L. Cone, in-person interview, September 14, 2017). As a consequence, in this case cleaning is limited to the removal of loose dust accumulated during subsequent shows.

A further conservation issue is the replacement of the components. As Cone stated: “things happen and it is glass and people are people and you make mistakes” (L. Cone, in-person interview, September 14, 2017). In other words, glass prisms break easily during the install, at which point replacement might become an option to consider.

\[232\] In the CMS of SMK, 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 was classified as a sculpture. At MoMA 26.05.2009, 8:43 belongs to the collection of painting and sculpture, and at Pompidou 16:32 – 26.05.2009 is classified as ‘Oeuvre en 3 dimensions / Installation’. 
In fact, a precedent was set during the piece’s career at SMK. According to Cone, while some of the prisms were already broken before the acquisition, others cracked during the preparation of one of the displays. As the latter happened in Venice, famous for its glassmakers, the reproduction of the broken parts was actually considered as an option. In the end, due to circumstances the reconstruction never happened, and the decision was taken to leave the space of the broken prism empty. Other fragile glass elements to be substituted eventually in the future are the light bulbs. As the SMK piece has never been displayed turned on, until now there has been no need to evaluate their condition. Hence, it is highly possible that some of the bulbs are already worn, or similarly to the prisms they might break during the handling of the piece. Yet, the replacement of bulbs in artworks may prove challenging due to changes in market regulations. The traditional, incandescent ones are slowly disappearing to be substituted with other types of electric lighting.

These micro-decisions or micro-interventions, seemingly insignificant to the general concept of the piece, constitute the everyday work of the museum conservator. Only some of these challenges can be identified and addressed today – the rest remain unforeseeable. To confront them, broader questions need to be addressed: is the aesthetic appearance of each of the chandeliers important for the reading of the piece? Is the public, while looking at the piece, supposed to admire its shape and design? What kind of alteration of the latter could influence the comprehension of the artwork? Essential for answering these questions is the story of Vo’s father visiting the former ballroom and the concept of chandeliers that astonish and “make you forget things” (see: p. 180). Clearly, the splendour of the artefact is what provokes amazement, and therefore its aesthetic appearance is a significant property that should be preserved. This observation may lead to the conclusion that if the gaps resulting from the broken prisms influence the overall aesthetic perception and the ‘impressiveness’ of the chandelier, they should be filled in with reconstructions. Hence, also these queries, which relate to traditionally defined conservation as a material-based discipline, can be answered only through careful analysis of the statements given by the artist and through the study of the artwork’s origins.

Apart from chandeliers, the ‘artwork constituency’ includes other physical objects that hold agency over subsequent manifestations of the ‘Chandeliers Project’. All of them afford different display options and are key to understanding the particular
'mode of presentation’ of each of the chandeliers. As auxiliary, seemingly replaceable components they might be considered ‘display furniture’ or part of the scenography, similar to a plinth or vitrine. However, since they are chosen by the artist and assigned to the artwork, with time they might become a part of it. Still, since they have a different status at each of the institutions under study, they are currently not considered ‘the objects of conservation’ as such.\textsuperscript{233}

Before entering the SMK collection, 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 had only been exhibited once, hanging from the ceiling of the gallery at the Kunsthalle Basel. However, this way of displaying it was conditioned by the characteristics of the space, and few museums have a gallery that would allow the piece to be presented in such a way. As recalled by SMK curator Marianne Torp, the solution to this challenge was found accidentally. Upon its arrival at the museum, the chandelier was assembled on an industrial gantry supplied by the transport firm:

> We borrowed it [the gantry] from that shipping company, just to transport it [the chandelier], and I think even for Louise and Morten [conservator and art-handler] to assemble it, they needed that structure. And then Danh saw that [the chandelier assembled on the gantry]. And he was like: no, this is great. I want to keep it like that. And that was the whole deal, […] we said to the shipping company: we just mounted this chandelier on your tower, could we buy that tower from you, because now the artist wants to keep it. And they said: no. Because they have that custom made, for their own purposes. Ok, so then can you [order] a new, custom-made one, we will pay for that production, and the response was: no we want to have that original one. We don’t want a copy. Which I found so hilariously funny because suddenly this whole idea of what is original and what is a copy that we have in the art world for ages, suddenly that applies to a tower which belongs to a shipping company. So we actually had to talk to their supplier, blacksmith or whatever and make him do a copy from theirs […]. (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017)

\textsuperscript{233} At Centre Pompidou the rack’s status is that of an element of scenography (P. Sticht, in-person interview, November 12, 2017).
The story of the construction that supports 16:32:15–26.05.2009, the chandelier from Centre Pompidou, is similar, although it started long before the acquisition took place. The then owner of the former Hôtel Majestic agreed to lend out the chandelier for the purpose of the show at Kadist on the condition that it would be dismounted and transported by professionals. Thus, to relocate the piece to the gallery, the Kadist team hired a company specialized in the transport of chandeliers. Director of Kadist’s Parisian office Émilie Villez, who was involved in the production of the show, recalled the circumstances of the backstage decision making as follows:

It is like when you ship a piano, you have to have like a specific company. For chandeliers it is the same. And [...] only those companies know how to do it. So they dismantled part of it [the chandelier], and have this [the rack], because you cannot crate it directly. And Danh liked this and he decided, ‘Let’s keep it for the show because it looks really good’. And you will see this little room [the gallery], it really has a low ceiling. His first idea was to hang it from the ceiling, but it wouldn’t work, so we decided to keep it that way and block the door [with the rack]. (E. Villez, in-person interview, November 24, 2017)

Yet, the apparently one-time decision to display the piece on the rack was conditioned, among other factors, by the height of the gallery space. After the show, the metal construction was returned to the transport company, and during subsequent exhibitions the chandelier was presented without it. The rack was reincorporated into the presentation when the piece entered the collection of Centre Pompidou. Pamela Sticht from the collections department, who supervised the acquisition of the piece, justified this choice in the following way, in an interview conducted by the author:

Because in Centre Pompidou, the architecture is very special, and we cannot hang a lot of stuff from the ceiling. [...] Because we wanted to show it in the middle, and in certain rooms, we cannot suspend things from the ceiling. And it would have been necessary to have metal grids, and it would have been very ugly. [...] And the idea was also to have the lighting, special lighting which would make shadows on the floor. [...] [So] we did it [the rack]. [...] The studio of Danh Vo told us that we should have this because
actually, this was from the [...] transporter, [...], that is what I’ve heard, that Danh Vo was interested in this kind of representation because it is a part of how you can transport it (P. Sticht, in-person interview, November 12, 2017).

Also in the case of 26.05.2009, 8:43, from the MoMA collection, there is an object assigned to accompany the piece on display. At the Hamburger Bahnhof the core of the chandelier was presented on a wooden pallet (Figure 40). As the chandelier arrived directly from Paris, it was probably the same device that was used for transport purposes. Interestingly, the pallet that served as a base for the chandelier’s core at the MoMA exhibition two years later was identical to the one used in Berlin (Figure 41). In all likelihood, the core of the chandelier has never been separated from the palette – there was never a need to do so – meaning that it has been stored together with the piece and, in a way, has become incorporated as a part of the artwork.

The accounts of the chance circumstances that shaped both the ‘artwork constituency’ and the way the three art objects may be presented have a twofold importance. Firstly, these stories illustrate the way the artist makes choices that influence the actual physical appearance of the artwork and provide insights into his display strategies. Secondly, they demonstrate that these choices were often made in and triggered by interactions with institutions. Thirdly, they point towards another level of the artwork’s reading. As Vo stated in the excerpt quoted before, “chandeliers are not meant to travel, they are not meant to be disassembled” (see: p. 182). With the gesture of showing them as ‘objects of transport’, the artist transformed the nature of the chandeliers from luxurious decoration to significant artefacts – carriers of the artwork’s meanings. Their displacement and shifting ownership, both notions linked to the issue of belonging present in the artist’s biography, endow the chandeliers with what Tom McDonough has identified as a ‘mnemonic function’ (Brinson, 2018; McDonough, 2016, p. 217). Brinson connects this mobility of cultural artefacts to the colonial mechanisms of former

236 However, the palette is not listed in the museum’s online catalogue, see: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/135979.
empires linked with the flux of global trade seen as an inherent feature of capitalism (Brinson, 2018). Hence, a chandelier presented ‘in transit’ conveys different meanings than when suspended from the ceiling – while the first represents displaced heritage, it is the latter that astonishes and ‘makes people forget’.

The artist’s statements and the stories from institutional stages of the artwork’s career presented in this section add new dimensions to the conservation problem defined at the beginning of the chapter. The initial query as to how to display each of the chandeliers in the future primarily addresses issues related to presentation understood as physical installation: on the gantry, hung from the ceiling, on the rack, dismantled on the floor, with the lights on or off. However, as has been seen, interactions with other works, the context of a given show’s narrative, and the information provided to the public may also alter the artwork and, as such, are factors that need to be considered when making decisions about how it should be displayed.

The question arises as to whether it is possible to control all these factors. Probably not, or at least not without deploying a complicated, military-like strategic operation around each exhibition. Furthermore, the lack of conciseness and the often contradictory character of the factual information embedded in the stories presented above leaves space for interpretation, subjectivity and playfulness, which are, and always have been, concepts inseparable from the notion of art itself. Nevertheless, in line with the definition of conservation as presented in the second chapter of this book, all decisions related to the possible futures of an artwork should be, above all, informed, or in other words based on or influenced by a complete understanding of the situation. As has been argued throughout this chapter, this can be achieved only through a careful study of the entire ‘artwork constituency’, which consists of physical objects and the stories that complement and contextualise them. These stories should be available and accessible in the moment of decision making, and accordingly should be actively collected and conserved together with the art object. How is this issue addressed by the institutional keepers of the ‘Chandeliers Project’? The next section aims to address this question by presenting and assessing the approach to and structure of the documentation on Vo’s work at each of the three museums.
3.5.2 Documentation, Presentation and Collaboration: A comparative study of institutional practices

What we have, then, are three art objects representing one artwork, distributed among the collections of three influential art museums. This unique situation has provided an opportunity for a comparative investigation into how the stories identified in this chapter as carriers of a significant part of the artwork’s identity are represented, and how they function in an institutional setting. And yet, discrepancies in the organisational structure and the character of each of the institutions, unequal access to their resources related to their confidentiality policies, and differences in the institutional story of each chandelier, have made this endeavour particularly challenging. Due to the circumstances mentioned earlier and to the differing points of access to each of the institutions – through a conservator, curator or researcher – the assessments have not been made on an equal basis. Consequently, all the factors that have influenced the results of the comparison are addressed in the subsequent sections describing each of the institutions studied. The investigation is structured according to the focal points identified in Chapter 2, and unfolds around the museums’ procedures and infrastructure for artwork-related documentation, practices concerning conservation and collection care with an emphasis on the artist interview, and the collaboration with the artist regarding the artwork in question. The research was guided by the following question: how do each of the institutions under study deal with the conservation problem identified in the previous sections in terms of documentation and decision making?

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

SMK is a national art museum that on the one hand holds art collections dating back to the 16th century, and on the other actively collects contemporary art by both Danish and international artists. In the Collection, Research and Conservation Department there is one curator responsible for collecting and exhibiting works created after 1960 up to the present day. While conservation tasks are distributed according to traditional, medium-related areas, one conservator divides her time between sculpture and contemporary art. The documentation of a particular artwork from the collection is dispersed among diverse institutional archives and each structural unit collects the information of its interest. The basic tombstone information for each piece can be
accessed through CMS. The sub-department Collection Management and Digitization administers two other databases that hold information related to the artworks from the collection. While the first one provides access to photographic documentation, the second stores the data from the Registry Office consisting of documents associated with loans. There is also a separate database accessible only through the Archive Assistant containing the ‘official correspondence’ addressed to the museum related to acquisitions, loans, etc. However, less ‘official’ emails between curators or conservators and artists are stored only in the personal files of museum employees. Another archive, this time an analogue one, houses information related to the artists represented in the collection. With regard to Vo, it consists mostly of printouts of information found on the Internet, such as interviews and critiques as well as photocopies of Danish press articles about the artist and his work. The conservation department has a separate paper archive where conservation-related documentation is kept, mostly in the form of reports. The digital data, for instance photographic documentation of conservation activities, is organized in folders on the museum server.

While the exhibitions that featured 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 are listed in the CMS record, none of the aforementioned archives contain images depicting the consecutive presentations of the object or of the other two chandeliers. For instance, in conservation-related digital documentation kept on the museum server, one finds the photographs of the piece taken during installs by conservators and art handlers, most of which depict the condition of the chandelier or the installation process. Nevertheless, this documentation does not show the final way the artefact was displayed or the context of its presentation. The photographic database of the museum holds one image that depicts the chandelier as installed on display at the SMK exhibition (Figure 37).

237 In many cases couriers, usually conservators and art handlers that accompany the work during the transport and install on external exhibitions, do not stay until all pieces are assembled on display. In consequence, they often do not have the possibility of documenting the final result of the installation process.
The museum has built a close relationship with Vo over time. From the outset SMK played an important role in promoting Vo’s work and invited him to participate in numerous shows, both group and solo. According to the employees of the institution interviewed during the course of this research, the artist was involved in all of the museum’s activities related to the artwork in question, including acquisition, consecutive displays and loans. Although SMK maintains close ties with the artists represented in its collection, especially those from the local scene, systematic interviewing for documentation or conservation purposes is not a common practice, neither within the framework of the curatorial team nor the conservation department. The former operates in a more spontaneous way, discussing with artists’ issues related to the possible ways that their works might be displayed during the install. Marianne Torp describes these discussions as follows:

There is this knowledge, every time we are installing a more complicated piece, I speak to Louise, I speak to Morten [AW: the conservator and the art-handler], hey, how are we doing, how was it? But I think we are not [...] very systematic in actually writing down notes from those discussions that we have every time we invite an artist to reinstall his or her work [...] because there are a lot of decisions and considerations obviously taking place when you are installing and discussing a piece, and that should be documented. Now it is not documented, it is just happening. And then you have to do it all over again. [...] And I think that should be something that I should do more systematically. Document the conversations that you have with the artist about the work and about the installation of it. Definitely, I am just totally exhausted, in thinking how to have a conversation, take notes, write, type-write them afterwards, it seems quite ... you know a lot about it. (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017)

Thus, although the conservator acknowledges the importance of collecting artists’ statements, due to time constraints she is only able to consult with artists in relation to the practicalities of particular conservation treatments.

Vo is considered a Danish artist and SMK, as a national museum, is responsible for representing his oeuvre in its collection. Besides 08:03:51, 28.05.2009, SMK holds several other pieces by the artist.
That was my original intention, that I am going to do a lot of artist interviews, and I did a couple of artist interviews [...] then, [...] my relationship with artists became like, more hands-on, ‘Come to the workshop and let’s have a talk’, [...] and then I will take notes and include them in a condition report for example instead of doing like a formal interview. [...] I found that those kind of interviews are more useful, because I could use them for a specific work. Because general oeuvre interviews are very time consuming and, you have to do a lot of research, a lot of work and I just never have the time to do it. So then instead of getting frustrated about it I just thought, well I am going to do problem-based interviews. So that if I have something in workshop I’ll just call the artist and say: hey can you come in, [...] and then while they are there, usually I’ll ask them a couple of questions about other things if I have something I want to know. So my original intention to do like a lot of artist interviews in a systematic way never really happened and it’s a time issue. It’s time and resources actually. (L. Cone, in-person interview, September 14, 2017)

Even though Vo was never ‘officially’ interviewed by the curator or the conservator, some of the stories related to the ‘Chandeliers Project’ have nevertheless been documented by the institution. Just after the acquisition of 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 the museum produced a 4:30 minute-long video about the piece in which Vo tells the history of its conception. The film comprises fragments of the recording of Vo’s lecture at his Alma Mater, the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, combined with shots showing the chandelier being assembled upon its arrival at the museum.239 In this lecture, Vo speaks about his father’s role in setting the artwork’s meanings, and the importance of the effect the chandeliers were intended to have on people. The video clip was produced for educational purposes and made accessible via SMK’s website.240 The full, unedited version of the recording is not available within the museum’s holdings.241

240 As of late 2017.
241 This instance has been confirmed during the research [L. Cone, personal communication, 20 September 20, 2017].
The display setting of the chandelier is addressed directly in one of the documents related to the acquisition. The database that contains the ‘official’ museum correspondence stores various emails exchanged between the gallery that handled the sale of the chandelier and the SMK curator. The process of negotiations spans across ten emails, towards the end of which the gallery informs the curator that the sale can only be finalized pursuant to a condition set out by the artist. According to the gallerist, Vo has requested to be directly involved in choosing the space where the piece will be installed. In the interview conducted during this research, Marianne Torp, who led the negotiations on behalf of the museum, was asked to comment on this conversation.

AW: Was it a real condition for acquiring this piece?

MT: No, it was just a little power game. Or power joke, I think. I was bargaining the price and conditions, so they said: ok, we accept it, but then Danh wants to choose where to place it. I could have imagined that he at that point would think it should be at the Hammershøi room or something like that. And then we spoke, I guess, and then we ended up in this space upstairs. (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017).

Upon acquisition the piece was not accompanied by any instructions regarding its presentation, and the way the chandelier should be displayed is not discussed in any of the documents encountered during my research. Nevertheless, the institution does have a clear view regarding the available possibilities. According to Torp, 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 can be installed in the future in any way possible. When asked if it can be presented disassembled lying on the floor, the way that the chandelier from MoMA is usually installed, she responded: “I would be totally open to having it displayed like that” (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017). Later in the conversation, Torp developed on the issue, explaining the way she might approach future displays of the piece:

AW: So in your opinion, the way each chandelier might be displayed is not fixed, and there is a possibility to play with that.


243 Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916) is one of the best-known Danish painters internationally.
MT: I think so. But I would definitely involve him. I would never decide myself.

AW: If you planned to install this piece once again here, at SMK, would you consult the artist about where and how to place it?

MT: I think I would suggest him a location. Hey, we want to display it again, I was thinking to show it that way ... and we would discuss it. Maybe he would not agree with me, he often has different ideas. (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017)

Museum of Modern Art, New York

At MoMA 26.05.2009, 8:43 is part of the Paintings and Sculpture Collection, and as such falls under the responsibilities of a sculpture conservator. For all museum collections the documents related to the artworks are managed by the Archive Department, which compiles them into Object Files, accessible by external researchers through the Study Center. Object Files are divided into two parts: while the first can be accessed on demand, the second is covered by a confidentiality clause.244 With regard to 26.05.2009, 8:43, the part open to external researchers contains only one document with attachments, namely a proposal for the acquisition of three works by Vo authored by two curators.245 The proposal includes a basic description of the artwork, a short history illustrated with photographs of previous ways it has been displayed, and the justification of the request.

While the limited access to information stood in the way of assessing both the body of documentation on Vo’s work and the institutional documentation strategy as a whole, some insights into MoMA’s practices were provided by museum employees interviewed during the fieldwork. According to Associate Curator in the Department of Drawings, Christian Rattemeyer, the documentation of artworks from the collection

244 The description of the way the collection-related documentation is structured is based on the author’s own experiences, information obtained from museum employees during in-person interviews, and information found online on MoMA’s website.

aims to cover four different categories of documents. The first is the correspondence between a curator and an artist related to the acquisition of the artwork. The second consists of all sources – articles, catalogue essays, etc. – that the curator consulted while researching the piece. The third category is the official documentation produced during the process of accessioning an artwork to the collection and throughout the whole institutional life of the object. The fourth one is the artist’s own contribution, gathered by means of a questionnaire:

And the last thing is, and we’ve only been doing that for about a decade or 15 years or so, is that we send out questionnaires to the artist to say, ‘Please tell us more about this object’. And some artists are very good and very detailed, other artists are not detailed at all, and don’t send it back or send it back minimally filled out. So that is information that is entirely in the volition of the artist. (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)

When asked about the practice of interviewing artists, Rattemeyer mentioned the MoMA Oral History Program (see: Chapter 1, p. 60). Documents produced and/or gathered by a curator during or prior to the accession of the piece (the correspondence and the sources consulted for research purposes) are at a certain point collected by the Collection Specialist, who organises the provided documentation into the Object File.

The Conservation Department has its own separate archive, and the documentation they produce is not included in the Object File. However, the conservators and curators work in close collaboration, so there is overlap between the files produced by the two

246 “So if there was an Artforum article that I’ve read, if there was a catalogue that I’ve used – all of that stuff usually gets photocopied and stuck in the file” (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017).

247 “Bids of gifts, bids of sales, invoices, copies of [...] receipts, and then we have two documents that the artist is signing, which is the NLE (Non-exclusive licence agreement) which gives MoMA the non-exclusive right to use the work, to document the work, to use the documentation for websites and catalogues, [...] communication, press” (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017).

248 “After every round of acquisitions we would get an email from the Collection Specialist saying, ‘Please give me all of your material that you’ve consulted, if you have bibliography, if you have photocopies, if you have website URLs, just send it to me, I will document it and I will put it in the object file’” (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017).
departments for each artwork. The description of the conservation documentation practices provided by Kate Lewis, Chief Conservator at MoMA’s David Booth Conservation Department, starts with the museum’s CMS, which, interestingly, does not appear in Rattemeyer’s account.

There is TMS, which is MoMA’s Collection Management System.249 This is a central place for collection and tracking information, which is the traditional practice across museums. One artwork, for example, might have multiple components (especially true for contemporary works), and you can track the location of all these components. TMS has multiple modules, which allows for associated information to be connected to each artwork. Conservation now actively uses the Conservation module in TMS to document different conservation activities, and is available to users across the Museum. No doubt common to all conservation departments, we also have paper records dating back to 1958, when the department was established; therefore today we have a mixture of paper artwork files, electronic artwork files, TMS, and conservation-related images stored in MoMA’s digital asset management system as part of our conservation documentation ecosystem. (K. Lewis, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)

When asked if MoMA’s conservation department does artist’s interviews, Lewis confirmed unambiguously:

Conservation regularly conduct artists’ interviews, which is now an embedded practice in contemporary art conservation. We collaborate with colleagues across the MoMA, including with curators, registrars, the AV team and exhibition designers. We may conduct one interview, we may have a series of interviews, depending on the artwork, the artist and related stakeholders. Interviews can also be re-visited over time, each time a work is installed it potentially provides an opportunity to revisit. It is an ongoing and collaborative discussion. (K. Lewis, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)
At MoMA, access to artist’s interviews is conditioned by the artist’s consent. While some of them are conceived for public use, others are meant exclusively for the internal use of the institution. When asked if Vo might have been interviewed about 26.05.2009, 8:43, Lewis responded that the decision to interview an artist depends upon a number of aspects, from the availability of the artist or their representative, to the extent of the documentation collected so far, including email correspondence with an artist, as well as more widely available resources. It is important to note that Lewis specialises in the conservation of time-based media art, and within her discipline it is established practice to document artworks by means of the interview.250

Although due to the confidentiality policy it was difficult to ascertain whether or not there were artist’s interviews with Vo, and to examine how his voice shows up in the museum’s documentation, some of Vo’s stories about 26.05.2009, 8:43 were found within the museum’s online resources. In 2010, as a part of the series of public talks called Conversations with Contemporary Artists, MoMA organized an Artist Talk presenting Vo in conversation with Julie Ault (Vo & Ault, 2010). The recording of this talk, cited extensively throughout this chapter, is available through the museum website and is one of the main sources for Vo’s statements about the artwork, its history and the artist’s approach to the issue of variable manifestations.

Since its acquisition for the collection, the chandelier owned by MoMA has only been put on view twice.251 The first time it was presented in a group show featuring only two of Vo’s pieces, and whereas the artist was not involved directly in the planning of the display, he was consulted about all curatorial choices related to the presentation of his works.252 The second one was Vo’s solo show at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville

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250 The practice of interviewing artists within the framework of MoMA’s time-based media conservation was described by Lewis in a public lecture during the 2017 MAPS conference in Budapest, see: Lewis, 2017.

251 As of December 2017. All three chandeliers were presented in the retrospective exhibition Take My Breath Away held first at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (February 9 – May 9, 2018) and subsequently at the SMK in Copenhagen (30 August – 2 December 2018), which started after the empirical part of this research ended.

Christian Rattemeyer, the curator of the MoMA show, recalled his collaboration with the artist and his impression from both shows as follows:

I sent him the floor plan [...] but basically, there was just one space, that was not very big, it was maybe 5 x 5 m, or maybe 7 x 7 m. [...] It [the chandelier] was on these blankets in Berlin. And I said if you want to do that again. And at the end he wasn’t so happy with the blankets, and [he said] it should be shown just on the floor. Which we did. [...] Whereas in Paris, it was in a huge space, kind of totally spread out. So it really is, however you want to lay it out. (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)

When asked if the MoMA piece has an assigned display format, or can be shown in any other possible way, Rattemeyer responded:

My sense is that there is probably a minimum and maximum guideline. And probably asking the artist you would get a different answer, but as far as I know, there is no specific instruction how it is to be shown. [...] As far as I know, if we went to Danh and said, ‘Hey, we would like to reassemble the chandelier and hang it from the ceiling’, he would probably say, ‘Ok, go ahead’. I think we wouldn’t do that, but there is nothing in my conversation or communication with the artist that suggests that that would not be possible. (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)

Centre Pompidou, Paris

The Department of Collections of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou is divided into sub-departments based on the artist’s date of birth and the medium of the work. The section responsible for Vo’s 16:32:15–26.05.2009 is called Service de la création contemporaine et prospective, which covers works by artists born

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254 The French name of the organizational unit that is responsible for collections is Conservation des Collections Arts Plastiques. It is divided into seven subunits: Modern Collections, Contemporary Collections, Contemporary and Prospective Creation, Graphic Art, Photography, Experimental Film, New Media and Conservation (Service de la restauration). See: http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/organisation/organigramme.pdf.
after 1960 and consists of four employees. Two of them are curators, while the position of the other two is designated as attaché. One of them is involved in the organization of exhibitions, while the other, the attaché de conservation, works mostly with artworks from the collection. This role is worthy of attention, as, similarly to MoMA’s Collection Specialist, it covers research on and documentation of collected artworks. According to Pamela Sticht, who has held this position for eight years, the attaché de conservation gathers documentation on the artwork prior to, during and after accession.

In terms of documentation, Centre Pompidou works with paper Object Files. These are available to researchers on demand and can be consulted via the Documentation Specialist. The latter is responsible for keeping and organizing information gathered by the attaché. In the case of 16:32:15–26.05.2009 the first page of the File consists of basic information about an artwork extracted from the museum CMS. The following parts include photographic documentation of the piece together with technical information, e.g. measurements, exhibition history illustrated with images, press releases from consecutive shows, and articles in which the story of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ is mentioned. An interesting section in the File, especially from the perspective of this research, is titled ‘analogies’. It gathers information related to similar works by the same artist, and in the case of Vo’s piece consists of information on shows that included other chandeliers, for instance, extracts from the catalogue of the exhibition Where The Lions Are, where the piece from the SMK was shown for the first time. The File also contains a confidential portion, which in this case consists of contracts, loan agreements, information related to the value and current location of the piece, as well as the correspondence with the former owner and the artist.

Artists are usually consulted during acquisition, which, according to Sticht, at Pompidou is a two-step process. Curators propose artworks to be purchased during the round of acquisitions and then all agree on a closed, common list. After that

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255 Namely: Documentarist (Documentaliste principale/Responsable des dossiers d’œuvres).

256 There are special conditions that have influenced the content of the File on 16:32:15–26.05.2009 that make it an atypical example of Pompidou’s documentation workflow. As mentioned before, Vo’s piece was accessioned to the collection only in 2016 as a donation and a part of a large private collection. Accordingly, at the time the research was conducted the record was still under construction.
phase, each artwork is carefully researched by the attaché. This involves collecting all available documentation from the broker – usually the gallery or the former owner, as in the case of Vo’s piece. Then the work is shipped to and installed in the museum to be presented to the acquisition committee for the final say. This first, pre-accession install is an ideal setting to invite artists and engage them in the conversation about the process of introducing their work to the institutional collection. When asked about the practice of interviewing artists, Sticht responded:

PS: Yes, of course, we do it, each time we buy something.

AW: How does it work in the day-to-day practice?

PS: It depends if they [artists] are available or not. [...] For example, we are having an artwork coming into the collection sold by Christie’s. I am writing to the artist asking him all the relevant, complementary information, and then seeing whether he is really open or not. Now I saw he is very open so maybe we can even meet and ... often they are coming for the first installation, and it is perfect, because then I can just ask all the questions I need.

AW: Are you recording these conversations?

PS: No, I am writing them down, I am doing reports.

(P. Sticht, in-person interview, November 12, 2017)

Conservators divided according to their material-related specialisations produce their own documentation, which is shared with other organizational units via the CMS but not included in the Object File. When asked about the general involvement of conservators in the documentation process, Sticht responded: “If they have some questions, they would ask me. If there is a loan request, they would ask me or consult the file” (P. Sticht, in-person interview, November 12, 2017).

Contrary to interviewees from the other two institutions discussed above, when asked about the possibility of displaying the Pompidou chandelier dismantled, the way the piece from MoMA is usually shown, Sticht responded without hesitation:

PS: [...] We don’t think it is possible.

AW: And what is your opinion about the possible future way of installing the piece?
PS: Of course, now as we own the piece, and taking into account what he already did [in the past], we would always suggest that it is advisable to do it the same way. If there is another way, then we really have to see whether it is possible or not.

AW: And what would be the factor to decide? Technical reasons, security reasons?

PS: Conservation reasons, also. [...] The issue is that if we receive a piece like this, we think that it should always be like this. For example, we have another artist who did an installation in Palais de Tokyo once, and we bought the piece. We had an information that this piece is meant to be evolving, so we are still working on framing the whole thing, so that is not exploding.

AW: So what you are trying to do is to control the situation.

PS: Yes. In some way, that is why I say that it is very important to have the documentation right when you do the acquisition. To really be clear how to actually define the freedom of the artist. It is more this kind of question actually. As soon as you get it [the artwork] in the collection, [...] it is of course, very enthusiastic to know that each time [we display the artwork] there can be some freedom and creativity, at the same time it is also something, if he really wants to be creative maybe he should do another piece, you know what I mean. It is very difficult to know. To find a balance.

(P. Sticht, in-person interview, November 12, 2017)

3.5.3 Summary of the Case Study

This comparative analysis of the documentation strategies of three institutional keepers of Vo’s chandeliers has revealed dissimilarities in the way the artwork-related documentation is conceptualised and organised at the different museums. Two of them use the Object File as a basic unit to compile documentation on an artwork that would otherwise be dispersed among different institutional archives, and therefore difficult to access and analyse all together. The use of the Object File at both institutions is linked to the position of the documentarist, a person whose main responsibility is to research artworks from the collection. The Object Files from Pompidou and MoMA contain images of the artwork’s previous manifestations, both of the piece that is a part of the collection as well as the other two chandeliers. None of the Object Files includes documentation produced by the conservation department.
In all past exhibitions of the musealised chandeliers, the artist was always consulted or directly involved in deciding how the artwork would be displayed. In most of the cases, these decisions were conditioned by the circumstances of the setting and made in collaboration with the host institutions, both during in-house shows as well as in instances of external loans. Whereas at SMK this process was not recorded in the institutional documentation, at the other two institutions it might be traced through the correspondence between the artist and curators kept in the confidential portion, which, however, was not made accessible for the purposes of my research. The approach to consulting artists about their works varies from institution to institution. The curator and the conservator from SMK do not conduct artist interviews due to constraints related to time and resources, but both work with artists on an everyday basis and acknowledge the importance of such collaboration and its documentation. The joint work with artists is recorded in the documentation in the form of notes (conservation department) or not recorded at all (curatorial department). The other two institutions affirm that artist interviews are a part of their regular practice. At MoMA interviews seem to be mostly an initiative of the conservation department, and are especially common in relation to caring for media art. Centre Pompidou understands all consultations with artists as interviews, and similarly to SMK these are included in the documentation in the form of reports. Unlike MoMA, at Pompidou conservators are not involved in this process.

None of the institutions conducted an artist interview in relation to the ‘Chandeliers Project’. However, in at least two institutions the broad scope of activities, mostly related to education and outreach, allowed for the inclusion in their holdings of some of the artist’s stories, classified as significant for the understanding of the artwork in previous sections of this chapter. The artist’s strategy in regard to informing the public about the work through the use of brass plaques is documented in the archive of Centre Pompidou. Finally, the approach to possible future presentations of the artwork differs from institution to institution. The curator from SMK considers that

\[257\] With regards to MoMA this is only an inference. However, I assume that if the artist were invited for consultation, the curator responsible for acquisition and display of the piece would be involved, or at least informed about the undertaking.

\[258\] The photographs of the brass plate from the exhibition Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst are included in the Object File.
their chandelier has no fixed form of display and can be shown in any possible way. The representative of MoMA opines similarly, but would rather avoid proposing as an option any other way of displaying than the one applied before. The stance of Centre Pompidou differs in this respect, and the institution tends to narrow down the possibilities, preferring to follow one fixed mode of display.

While this dissertation advocates for documentation as a tool that allows for the preservation of the inherent changeability of the contemporary artwork, two issues encountered during this investigation showed that this tool needs to be used with caution. The first one is linked to the acquisition-related correspondence studied in the archives of SMK. The text of the letter stating that Vo is interested in choosing the space where the chandelier is to be installed might be interpreted in the future as an instruction to be followed – an indication that there is actually a special spot at the museum where the artwork must be shown. Only a single comment by Marianne Torp, made during an interview conducted with the author and therefore not recorded in the institutional archive, serves to rectify this conviction. The second one is the statement given by Pamela Sticht concerning the documentation Centre Pompidou collects around the moment of acquisition. While speaking about the processes of framing artworks for institutional purposes, she mentioned that the documentation provides the institution with the means to achieve this goal. These instances demonstrate the power over the artwork’s shape that rests with documentation. Firstly, they prove that if even a single piece of information becomes disconnected from the main body of artwork-related documentation it can lead to unintended consequences. Secondly, they show that documentation, which throughout this book is presented as a means to keep the artwork open, might also be used for the opposite purpose: to fix the artwork’s shape so as to make it ‘manageable’ for the institution.

The interviews conducted at MoMA have shown that the comprehension of the notion of documentation as well as related tools varies within the institution and depends on the position of the interviewee and the way the artwork has been classified. Rattemeyer’s account of what MoMA’s documentation consists of does not include the technical infrastructure that carries the information, such as the CMS or Digital Asset Management mentioned by Lewis. While the former speaks more about content, the latter focuses on form. Another difference is the approach to the practice
of interviewing artists for conservation purposes – while the conservator asserts that interviews are conducted on a daily basis, the curator does not mention them at all. This might be related to the different scopes of interest of the two – compared with time-based media, in Prints and Drawings documentation might be of minor concern. However, as Rattemeyer himself noticed, besides traditionally understood drawings and prints, the latter collection also includes many conceptual pieces classified by medium.\footnote{259} Lewis noted differences in the approach to interviewing among the various conservation specialisations, which triggered a question as to whether, if the ‘Chandeliers Project’ had been classified as some medium other than sculpture, its chances of having the artist’s stories be documented through an interview would have been higher.

\footnote{259 Such as works by Douglas Huebler. In the interview conducted by the author, Rattemeyer noted that medium as a classification principle is contingent upon many different factors: “Those variable pieces [by Huebler] in which a kind of a location in the city gets designated by a photo of that location, a description of the geographical properties of that location gets typed up, and these three elements – the map, the photo and the description – get sort of mounted together into one work. In the 1970s the work of that series was acquired by the Department of Painting and Sculpture, under the idea of sculpture in the expanded field [...]. In the 1980s one work was acquired by the Department of Photography because they said this is a conceptual way of using photography to execute an artwork that exists in another field. In the early 2000s, one was acquired by the Department of Drawings because it was a collage – various things glued together on a piece of paper” (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017).}
3.6  **A Bundle of Relations: Conserving collections of documents and stories**

Despite his object-based practice, Vo is frequently categorised in the literature as a ‘performance art inspired conceptual artist’, and although this classification is far from precise, it points towards a perspective to adopt while studying his objects. Vo’s chandeliers, although indisputably unique and ‘auratic’ like traditional art pieces, are not artworks in and of themselves. They act rather as expressive means that transmit the artist’s narratives: Katrine Brinson has even called them ‘storytellers’ (Brinson, 2018). Despite being at the centre of the artwork, without the contextual and complementary information, these objects, however impressive, are just common decorative elements from the history of interior design. What makes them an artwork is the artist’s gesture of selecting them and embedding in them stories through which he communicates his interests and concerns. Following this line of thought, these stories are as indispensable for the artwork’s identity as the objects that represent it.

3.6.1  **Art Objects as Documents and Documents as Artworks**

The concept of the project, as introduced at the beginning of this chapter, not only enabled us to examine the notion of contemporary art from a new perspective, but also to emphasise the distinct role of objects in contemporary art and support the assumption that art objects might be considered documents. As Boris Groys (2002) observed, the art project’s goals are usually established in such a way that they cannot be evaluated as having been reached or not; in other words, one can never say whether the project has achieved what it was supposed to achieve (Kunst, 2014). In consequence, the project as a formula shifts the attention away from the result and toward the process, and this affects the way art might be defined (Groys, 2002b). Based on this stance, art might be understood not as the ‘result-oriented’ production of works of art but rather as documentation of the project. In consequence, in exhibition spaces the audience may encounter not only artworks in the traditional sense of the word but also documents,

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260 See e.g.: *Excessivism - A Phenomenon Every Art Collector Should Know*, Retrieved March 15, 2018, from https://www.widewalls.ch/excessivism-art-movement/. This designation also appears in the artist’s biography on Wikipedia.
which can often take the same forms and be exhibited in similar media in which art is commonly presented. The application of this theoretical approach to Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ allows the status of the artefacts collected to be shifted so as to place them on equal footing with other documents produced during the project.

The consideration of the artwork studied in this chapter as a project raises a question related to its beginning and end. While the beginning might be associated with the start of Vo’s interest in the former Hôtel Majestic, the end point is debatable. Formally, the project understood as the artistic activities carried out by Vo during his residency culminated with the exhibition at Kadist. However, as the stories presented here have demonstrated, this event was only one stage in the artwork’s career. Accordingly, for the ‘Chandeliers Project’ the concept of project might need to be expanded to later institutional stages of the artwork’s ‘life’ and embrace its subsequent manifestations, whereby it could be considered as ongoing and never-ending.

The example of Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ has shown that the identity, and likewise the legibility, of a contemporary artwork does not necessarily lie in the objects as such, but rather in the stories which the artist communicates through them and in relation to them. And yet, the collection-related practices of the chandeliers’ institutional keepers remain focused on “the original, unique, authentic product of the artist’s unique self and creative agency” (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). Hence, the stories that complement the objects and make them a part of the artwork are undervalued and often cast aside. The museums’ historically justifiable object-oriented approach entails that the artworks be acquired as objects, or in other words ‘objectified’, because their objecthood renders them exhibitable and circuitable within the traditional museum and art-market structure. As a result of the object-oriented classification principles at all of the museums studied during this investigation, the chandeliers themselves were classified as art and included in the collection, while the stories, as non-art with (mere) historical or research value, were either archived or, in many cases, were not even included in the museum holdings in any form.
To summarize, as a consequence of art museums’ current classification principles, upon crossing the threshold of the museum realm a contemporary artwork is distributed between the collection and various institutional archives. The art objects enter the collection while other documents get dispersed between archives – both institutionally endorsed ones like that of the conservation department, and semi-private ones like that of a curator. One can observe this process clearly in the example of 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 and SMK. The documentation that holds the stories related to the artwork can be found in the photographic database (documentation of the in-house installation setting), the database that holds the ‘official’ correspondence (negotiations of acquisition and loan conditions), Danh Vo’s record in the ‘artists archive’, and finally the two archives mentioned before – the conservation department archive and the curator’s archive. The key story for the understanding of the artistic concept – Vo’s father’s visit to the former Hôtel Majestic – exists within the museum holdings in the form of a short video kept on the institutional server, which is an unsecure repository from the perspective of preservation. Other stories, like the one related to the selection and acquisition of the gantry, were, before conducting this research, still present merely in the memory of the museum employees involved in the process. Furthermore, the information related to the artwork held within the archives is organised according to different principles and is not interlinked. Only some of these archives are stable, structured sets while others are more volatile and contingent.

Collections are at the core of art museums’ identity and in consequence institutions allocate an important part of their resources to their maintenance and care. Thanks to developments in science, refined preventive methods of care for material objects ensure their longevity for hundreds of years. In the meantime, the collection-related documentation is usually undervalued within the hierarchy of museum priorities, often spread across different and frequently unstable archives. The division of an artwork between the collection and archives poses a challenge to an artwork’s conservation because the entire ‘artwork constituency’ is indispensable not only for the legibility of the work but also for informed decision making related to the artwork’s possible futures. This statement is valid for both notions of conservation, whether the specifically object-oriented one or the expanded one as defined in the conclusions of Chapter 2. In the first case, the informed decisions related to possible interventions like cleaning, replacement of bulbs, rewiring or reconstruction of prisms would be based
on the entire ‘artwork constituency’. In the second one, the whole body of artwork-related documentation constitutes a reference point for ascertaining potential ways of presenting the work. That does not mean that in the case of contemporary art the art objects as a part of the ‘artwork constituency’ require any less attention than the objects of traditional art, but rather that other documents deserve equal consideration in terms of care and conservation.

How can contemporary artworks be collected without having to revolutionise the traditional concept of the museum built around a collection of objects? A helpful gateway to address this question is the notion of ‘artwork constituency’ borrowed from Domínguez Rubio and expanded in the introduction to this chapter (see: p. 186). In the case of the ‘Chandeliers Project’ the ‘artwork constituency’ consist of all three chandeliers, their subsequent presentations including all the auxiliary objects, such as the gantry, the pallet and the rack, as well as all the stories that complement, explain and contextualise them. What if instead of classifying the chandeliers as sculptures, the racks as props and the stories as documents, the entire constituency were accessioned to the collection as one inseparable entity, cared for and conserved as such?

Thinking about the entire ‘Chandeliers Project’ as one artwork does not entail that it cannot be owned by various institutions. All tangible components might be collected as representations, i.e. in the form of documents. In practical terms, it means that the artwork in the collection of SMK would consist of physical objects, such as the largest chandelier and the gantry, while other objects, such as two further chandeliers and props, could be represented there through drawings, photographs or descriptions. The stories might be collected in a variety of forms – as videos, audios, texts, etc. Given the opportunities afforded in this sense by new technologies, digital objects can stand in for both physical and intangible documents. Moreover, if the stories where afforded an importance on par with the corresponding art objects, more resources and effort would need to be allocated to collecting them, not only prior to and during acquisition, but also later on, over the entire institutional career of the artwork. That would involve more research and documentation, transforming these aspects into primary instruments for collecting, caring and conserving.
The auxiliary notion of ‘artwork constituency’ might be seen as the seed of what was defined in Chapter 1 as a model of artwork-related documentation. Both constitute the identity of an artwork and are inseparable from what the artwork is. Both conceptualise art objects as documents and are based on the premise that to collect, care for and conserve contemporary artworks, institutions need to find a way to bridge the domains of archive and collection. This chapter suggests that this can be done through the inclusion of the entire ‘artwork constituency’, or artwork-related documentation, in the museum collection. Yet, while the ‘artwork constituency’ is a rather stable entity, the model of artwork-related documentation based on Briet’s theory is regarded as a dynamic set where particular documents need to be activated in order to interrelate with each other. Stimulating this ‘aliveness’ requires conceptual and technical tools and infrastructure, and this issue and related challenges will be scrutinized in the following chapters (see: Chapter 5).

3.6.2 Objects that Speak through Stories

The study described in this chapter was conceived as the preparatory research for a face-to-face artist interview with Vo. Nevertheless, as with everyday practice at museums, this investigation had to be adapted to the circumstances. At the point when the data had been collected and analysed, and the script for the interview fully prepared, it turned out that the artist would not available for the rest of the timeframe assigned to the research project. This condition redirected the focus of the study to the existing talks and interviews, accessible as audio and video recordings or in the form of published text. As it turned out, all of the questions posed in the script prepared for the interview were addressed in the collected utterances by the artist.

Vo’s stories gathered for this study convey information essential for an in-depth understanding of the artwork and partake in defining its identity. Firstly, they describe the creative processes behind the artwork – how the idea emerged to make the chandeliers the protagonists of the piece and how it continued to develop later on. They expose the process of taking on meanings, the conceptual significance of the titles, present Vo’s uneasiness with the idea of converting the chandeliers into cultural souvenirs or personally fetishized objects, and his desire for the work’s interpretation to be open-ended. They provide insights into Vo’s approach towards the installation of
the chandeliers for display by showing that his decisions, although not premeditated but rather contingent on context and practically oriented, are a part of the creative process (“trying things out”). In the stories one can see that these choices have the potential to sanction new meanings and therefore need to be studied and understood on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, Vo’s statements and opinions combined with the study of his artistic practice, and particularly of the way he interacts with collecting institutions, make it possible to identify the conceptual, contextual and processual dimensions of the ‘Chandeliers Project’, as well as its potential media-variability. The latter feature is related to the capacity of the artwork to be presented in various forms, for instance, through three different chandeliers, but also catalogues and interviews understood as exhibition spaces. Thirdly, the juxtaposition of the artist’s stories with those provided by various institutional representatives reveals information about the history, role and possible uses of additional elements in the display. Still, all these stories gathered together do not grant direct solutions to the conservation problems defined in this chapter, but rather offer a basis for informed decision making.

The analysis of the artist’s stories has demonstrated once again that these need to be contextualised and complemented by the accounts of other parties involved in the artwork’s career. This point was already observed in the previous stage of the research on Mirosław Bałka, where the report of the conservator and the correspondence held in the museum archive revealed information essential for understanding the nature of the studied artwork. This time, however, the sources were not available in the archive, but instead needed to be uncovered through fieldwork, mainly through interviews with the facilitators and keepers of the ‘Chandeliers Project’. And as the last paragraph shows, only the combination and juxtaposition of all of these stories makes it possible to grasp the artwork’s identity and draw conclusions regarding the conservation problem. Consequently, as this research has shown, the artist’s statements and opinions act within the artwork-related documentation as initiators of interactions between all the documents, transforming the stable set into a dynamic entity. The goal of the artist interview as presented in Chapter 1 is the assemblage of stories for further interpretation. In line with this perspective, whereas collected utterances are no substitute for an actual interview, to a certain extent they can be seen as such. Would the artist interview contribute to the artwork’s documentation something different than the stories collected from artist talks and conversations with third parties? In my
opinion, besides complementing the information gathered previously, it could serve as a guide for its methodological evaluation and future usage, and these two functions will be studied further in the next chapter of this book.

Objects in contemporary art rarely speak by themselves. In order to begin signifying, they need a translation, mediation and interpretation “between the language of things and that of people” (see: opening quote on p. 114). Similarly, in forensic anthropology, bones become evidence of the past only if the information they carry is read, interpreted and publicly presented. For an artwork like Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ the discourse is provided with the means of prosopopeia by different solo voices joined into a choir through the forum of the museum. However, besides acting as forums to make an argument before the public, museums need to amplify and record these stories – actively collecting them by means of research and preserving them for the public of the future.

3.6.3 Conservation Problem: Final remarks

The study of the artist’s stories has confirmed that the artwork in question is both performative and open-ended. Therefore, at least at this stage of its career, there is no need to restrain the ‘Chandeliers Project’ by freezing it within one particular mode of display for each chandelier, something which most of the artwork’s keepers intuitively seem to understand. However, their opinions vary depending on their experience and familiarity with Vo’s work and the character of their relationship with the artist. The longer and closer Vo’s collaboration with the institution, the higher its confidence in his choices and decisions. Nevertheless, the situation of the current keepers is privileged because they have access to the artist and can back up their choices by giving him a say in them. This fact is acknowledged among decision-makers conscious of problems that will have to be faced in the future. During independently conducted interviews, two curators from different institutions, Rattemeyer and Torp, identified choices related to the presentation of contemporary artworks as a challenge:

I can only talk about other instances where [...] we have an artwork, and the artist says: you can install it whichever way you want. Nothing scares the museum more than the instruction ‘install it whichever way you want’. Who is going to make that decision? (C. Rattemeyer, in-person interview, July 14, 2017)
I haven’t really been in a situation when I had to work from those [artists’] specifications, without the artist being there. Because that is really the scariest part, as a curator, you know ... what do you actually do? You are ending up making decisions, which are normally the artist’s decisions, and that is frightening. (M. Torp, in-person interview, September 20, 2017)

In the permanent exhibition of Pompidou’s collection, the chandelier is displayed in the middle of a room, suspended in two parts from the metal rack (Figure 47). The rosette is placed on the lower bar of the rack and the chain suspended from the upper one. The bulbs are not lit and the shadows on the gallery floor are produced by artificial, general illumination. The label on the wall states:

16:32, 26.05.2009 is one of three chandeliers bought by the artist that used to hang in the ballroom of the Hôtel Majestic, where the Paris Accords were signed between Vietnam and the United States on 27 January 1973. This contemporary ready-made piece can be seen as a relic of a history
that invited scorn. Its ostentatious luxury mimics the vain pomp of the 
diplomatic occasion, indicating the West’s efforts to “enlighten” the rest of 
the world.

Just behind the chandelier hangs a monumental painting depicting silhouettes of three 
half-naked soldiers firing machine guns. Painted by Léon Golub, it is titled Vietnam 
I. This particular presentation may be seen as contradictory to what Vo expresses as 
his intention regarding this piece. Surrounded by other striking art objects and from 
the outset classified as a statement on the Vietnam War, there is little space for the 
encounter to leave the public with a sense of awe. Contrary to Vo’s wish, this display 
turns the chandelier into a ‘cultural souvenir’ and a ‘reconciliation of history’ (see: p. 183, 
131). Once mysterious, here, bereft of its lighting, it resembles more a dead, dissected 
animal, the sad trophy of a hunter. And yet, I can nevertheless imagine Vo accepting 
this condition and happily agreeing to include it in the chandelier’s biography, saying 
something along the lines of, ‘I just think we should work with contradictions and what 
comes from them. That is also very productive. We shouldn’t be so dogmatic, no?’

My research on Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’ finally did bring me to Vo’s Berlin studio. 
Although the artist was not present at the time, I was able to interview studio manager 
Marta Lusena, which reaffirmed the assumption that the way all three chandeliers 
can be displayed rests only on the artist’s decision. When asked the recurring question 
about whether it is possible to show the chandelier from SMK the same way as the 
piece from MoMA, she offered a firm answer:

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This imaginary statement is rooted in real interviews conducted with the artist. Originally these 
phrases are contextualized as follows:

DV: [commenting on his reluctance to include the story of his father’s visit to the former Hôtel 
Majestic in the display of the chandeliers] It is such a good story. How should you add it into 
this cold white space...
JA: But you do it all the time with things […]; the information is in the work and in the spatial 
The thing is more than I think it [sic] differently. But I think that this is also very productive, we 
shouldn’t be so dogmatic, no? [laughing] (Vo & Ault, 2010)

DV: I just think we should work with contradictions and what comes from them. (Maerkle, 
2011)
ML: This is the artist’s decision. You have to ask Danh about it. But as far as I know, none of those chandeliers has a fixed mode of display, every time it depends on the show and on the space. (M. Lusena, in-person interview, October 16, 2017)

Interestingly, at the time of my visit, Lusena was working on the technical specifications and guidelines for the installation of one of the chandeliers requested by its institutional keeper. When asked what kind of information she was planning to include in the document, she hesitated:

ML: What we can really provide right now is just the description of the way Danh installed it for the first time, but we will definitely include the very important sentence that says, ‘For any future exhibition of the piece, please contact the artist’. Or the studio. (M. Lusena, in-person interview, October 16, 2017)

Which of course leaves us with the predicament that this dissertation seeks to remedy: What is to be done, then, when the artist is unavailable and, most importantly, when the artist is no longer alive?