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On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum

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Chapter 5

Artworks, Archives and Interviews: Reinventing institutional practices

Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for everything and everything in its place. [...] My problem with sorting orders is that they do not last; I have scarcely finished filing things before the filing system is obsolete. (Perec, 1997, p. 191)

“It’s all about the art object itself,” the museum director said arguing that what we are currently doing with the Van Abbemuseum and its collection transgresses the rules of art. “I honestly don’t think it is,” I replied, “it’s about the context at least as much, possibly more – and as museums we should give people a chance to make their own minds up.” (Esche, 2009)

5.1 Introduction: Equalising the collection and the archive

The difficulties implicit in the institutional care of contemporary artworks result from an incompatibility between the organisation of today’s museums and the requirements of contemporary art. Novel approaches developed in the field of contemporary art conservation, although often acknowledged among museum professionals, are rarely employed to their fullest potential. By studying institutional uses of the artist interview – one of the innovative tools developed to support conservation – previous chapters identified, exposed and examined several factors that stand in the way of implementing these ‘new’ methods and, in consequence, threaten the very continuity of collected works of art. The first factor is the number and extent of the organisational divisions stemming from the traditionally object-based structure of museums, and the related classificatory principles. The second is the character of the relationship between artists and museums. Building on the ideas presented throughout this book,

this chapter completes the construction of the theoretical model of the ‘artwork-as-(an) archive’, which is intended to help overcome these difficulties and adapt the existing museum structure to the needs of contemporary art. It starts with the description of practices employed by museums that have approached the same challenge for different purposes, but following similar conceptual underpinnings. The introduction of the theoretical model is supported with examples that point to potential practical solutions for its implementation in museums, as well as obstacles that need to be overcome for successful implementation. Finally, it summarises the findings related to the artist interview, and demonstrates how the artwork-as-an-archive model might boost the use and efficiency of interviewing in the museum.

As the empirical part of this study has demonstrated, a contemporary artwork is a potentially changeable entity that is distributed between art objects, processes, concepts and contexts, and is shaped by all of these factors throughout its whole career. Musealisation entails the transformation of the artwork into a self-representation and a set of documents, where art objects are understood as evidence on equal footing with other elements in the set. This condition implies that the comprehension and therefore perpetuation of an artwork rely on the equal consideration of all documents produced around it. Accordingly, this dissertation proposes that the documents that carry the artwork’s identity need to be accessioned to and included in the museum collection on the same terms as art objects. After accession, documents become documentation, which should be dynamic in order to represent potentially changeable artworks, i.e. its components need to interact to create new knowledge that in turn contributes to the set. However, ‘setting documentation in motion’ requires both stimulus and infrastructure.

The observations made during the fieldwork proved that the notion of the artwork-related documentation, based on the Suzanne Briet’s approach as introduced in Chapter 1 (see: p. 73), possesses certain features that might offer solutions in order to overcome the incompatibility between the object-based organisation of museums and the character of contemporary artistic production, and in consequence facilitate the task of safeguarding the continuation of contemporary artworks. The concept of artwork-related documentation recognises art objects as documents, and equalises them with other documents that carry the artwork’s identity, and as such represent the artwork. It is thought of as an open-ended, dynamic system of interrelated documents

that create knowledge by interacting with each other. Its organisation is rhizomatic and therefore decentralised and non-hierarchical. Conceptualised in these terms, artwork-related documentation challenges the traditional classification principles of museums in two ways: firstly, by implicitly diminishing the privileged position of art objects within the museum's environment and placing them on equal terms with documents; and secondly, by elevating the importance of documents in relation to artworks. In museums, documentation is usually held in archives. The application of the concept of artwork-related documentation would position the two museum domains – the collection, which stands higher in the museum hierarchy, and the 'collection archive', which traditionally has an auxiliary function – at the same level of importance.³⁴⁹ Is it feasible to implement this idea in museums that collect contemporary art? And if yes, how?

5.2 Merging Collection and Archive, Artworks and Documents: Radical institutional practices

Over the last decades several collecting institutions have addressed the discrepancy between the traditional object-centred structure of the museum and the character of contemporary artistic production. Some of them have responded to this challenge by revising the traditional separation of collection and archive, and the related classification principles. This section features two examples of institutional practices that meet these characteristics – that of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Although the purposes behind this institutional, critical self-reconsideration are different than those that motivated this research, which is oriented towards preservation, its practical results might clarify, illustrate and expand my argument. Moreover, the purpose of emphasising similarities between

349 In many art museums the 'collection archive' is still undervalued or even non-existent. In most museums the core of the artwork-related documentation focuses on registration and conservation (in the traditional sense of the word, see: Chapter 1, p. 76) and other documents. For example, flyers or videos that are produced for publicity and presentation are often regarded as being of secondary importance and stored outside of the collection archive proper. As such, for a long time these documents were not considered of great relevance for the perpetuation of an artwork, as in the case of the video recording of Danh Vo's lecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts presented in Chapter 3, p. 196. See also: Dekker, 2018.

innovative approaches to institutional contemporary-art collecting, as discussed in the curatorial and conservation fields, seeks to bring them into closer connection and encourage future collaboration.

In Europe, critical thinking about the structure of the art museum, and its possible obsolescence in relation to new art and experimental artistic practices, developed within the framework of New Institutionalism. In the arts, New Institutionalism relates to a series of curatorial, administrative and educational practices that emerged at the end of the 1990s mostly in medium-sized, publicly funded contemporary art institutions, and involved the reorganisation of their structures and a re-definition of activities (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013).³⁵⁰ The term New Institutionalism was introduced by the curator and critic Jonas Ekeberg, for whom the main aim of this current, at least on a discursive level, involved catching up with contemporary art and the changing working methods of artists.³⁵¹ Novel practices were oriented towards de-emphasising the role of the exhibition in favour of fostering the production of artworks, promoting the participation of artists and artist collectives in institutional programmes, designing new approaches to mediation and education, and transforming institutions into discursive platforms for socio-political, economic and cultural issues oriented towards micro-publics (Preston, 2014, p. 183). New Institutionalism was a temporal phenomenon related to a certain discursive context within contemporary art institutions identified

350 In the US, in the context of political science, economics, organisational behaviour and sociology, New Institutionalism (or neoinstitutionalism) is a methodological approach that explores how institutional structures, rules, norms, and cultures constrain the choices and actions of individuals when they are part of a political institution, see: Breuning, M., & Ishiyama, J. Neoinstitutionalism | social science. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoinstitutionalism>. However, the trend discussed in this section, despite having the same name, is a separate phenomenon that developed specifically among art institutions focused on art of the 20th and 21st centuries. The current of New Institutionalism in art institutions is discussed in depth in issue 21 of the journal *Oncurating.org*, see: Kolb, L., & Flückiger, G. (2013). (New) Institution(alism). *Oncurating.Org*, (21), 4–5. See also: Deiana, 2017; Doherty, 2004; Szreder, 2018.

351 Ekeberg coined the term New Institutionalism in the first issue of the publication series *Verksted*, published by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway in 2003. See: Ekeberg, J. (2003). *New Institutionalism*. *Verksted*, 1.

with particular curators, rather than a fixed alliance or movement.³⁵² Although its historical phase ended in the mid-2000s (Deiana, 2017), its influence still resonates in many contemporary art institutions, and the concepts and practices presented in this section are rooted within this current.³⁵³

The urge to critically reinvent contemporary art institutions as fostered within the framework of New Institutionalism found its continuation in the activities undertaken by the confederation *L'Internationale*.³⁵⁴ This consortium of six public and semi-public European modern and contemporary art museums defines itself as a 'transinstitutional organisation' that, among other pursuits, promotes the shared use of collections and museum archives across its network. The concept of 'common heritage' fostered by the consortium is based on interconnected archives and collections, "challenging traditional notions of exclusiveness, closure and property" ("*L'Internationale*," n.d., unpagged). The consortium declares that art and its institutions have the power to question and challenge their own specific systems, such as the bureaucratic and self-referential structure, by experimenting with new protocols and developing more decentralised models ("*L'Internationale*," n.d.). The internal experiments around the idea of connecting the collection and the archive were carried out mainly by two members of the organisation – MACBA and the Van Abbemuseum. While the first works towards reinventing the registration and cataloguing system, the second uses display as its testing ground.

352 Consistently recurring names are Charles Esche (formerly Rooseum, Malmö, now Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), Maria Lind (Kunstverein München), and Manuel Borja-Villel (formerly MACBA, Barcelona, now Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid), see: Deiana, 2017. Even the term New Institutionalism was opposed by the actors associated with it. Charles Esche chose to label his own practice as 'experimental institutionalism' while Jorge Ribalta, curator of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), called the novel practice tested in his institution as 'experiments in a new institutionality' (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013, pp. 8–9).

353 Curator and writer Simon Sheikh, in conversation with Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger, stated that New Institutionalism "spread like a bug all through the system and upwards in the system" (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013, p. 15).

354 *L'Internationale* brings together six major European art institutions: Moderna galerija (MG+MSUM, Ljubljana, Slovenia); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS, Madrid, Spain); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA, Barcelona, Spain); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium); SALT (Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey) and Van Abbemuseum (VAM, Eindhoven, the Netherlands). For more information about the consortium see: <http://www.internationaleonline.org/confederation>. The main actors that connect *L'Internationale* to New Institutionalism are Charles Esche and Manuel Borja-Villel.

At the turn of the millennium, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) decided to address the growing interest in documentation in contemporary art and the need to embrace research within the scope of institutional activities by launching the Centre for Study and Documentation (CED).³⁵⁵ Opened in 2007, the CED hosts and cares for the documentary material that constitutes the Archive and Library, and it is in charge of disseminating and activating the content of both. This dissemination entails enhancing the internal and external accessibility of the holdings and supporting research. The Archive and Library, which constitute the CED's core, act within the structure of the museum as a continuation of the MACBA Collection, and these three branches – Archive, Library and Collection – are conceptualised as 'Patrimoni MACBA' (MACBA heritage), formed by materials in a wide range of formats and supports. In the words of Mela Dávila Freire, the former director of MACBA Public Activities, the CED's collections "are not seen as subsidiary or secondary to the art collection; rather, they complement, expand and strengthen it, establishing ties, not of dependency, but of mutual bonding" (Dávila Freire, 2012, p. 200). According to Freire, this approach derives from the need to respond to the reduced importance of the end-products of artistic activity, namely art objects, and the need to shift the focus to relations between different actors involved in the creative process, as well as the creative process as such (Dávila Freire, 2012). This line of thinking led the museum to reject the conventional categories of 'artwork' and 'document', a separation that MACBA considers out-dated (Dávila Freire, 2011). To overcome this distinction in practice, the museum employed a structure that no longer differentiated between 'the artistic' and 'the archival', creating a single cataloguing method and system for both collection and archive.³⁵⁶

355 On the English version of the MACBA website, as well as in the other English-language sources related to MACBA's policies, this unit is called the Study Center. However, for the purpose of this section I have decided to employ a direct translation of its original name (in Catalan: Centre d'Estudis i Documentació) as it reflects more precisely the actual scope of its activities.

356 Dávila Freire commented on additional, practical advantages of implementing a common system for collection and archive in the following way: "amongst other things, this fluid relationship avoids the need for endless, futile discussion aimed at ascertaining whether certain research collections are 'works' or 'documents'. Rather, it emphasises their hybrid nature, their combination of the two categories" (Dávila Freire, 2012, p. 199).

To understand what this radical gesture entails from the perspective of this research, it is important to introduce the CED Archive and its holdings. The Archive is divided into three categories: Documentary Collection, Personal Fonds and MACBA's Historical Fonds.³⁵⁷ The first one consists of artists' publications, publicity material, posters and other such materials. The second one contains documentary material generated by activities of actors linked to contemporary artistic practice, who could be artists and artistic collectives, collectors, curators, etc. The third one, MACBA's Historical Fonds, holds the documentation generated by the museum in the course of its activities.³⁵⁸ The common cataloguing method makes it possible to link information that is usually dispersed all over the institution in a common platform.³⁵⁹ In practical terms this means that a search performed in MACBA's collection management system by the title or inventory number of a particular artwork from the collection will yield all related items (records), such as the main entry of the artwork, documentation of exhibitions organised by the museum where the artwork was presented, all public activities related to the artwork including talks and conferences, articles, books, videos showing the installation process, interviews with artists in the form of transcripts and/or video recordings, and much more.³⁶⁰ These records, which represent analogue or digital documents that are physically stored in various locations, create a virtual archive of the artwork. Simultaneously, the CED is the infrastructure for the systematic care of the archive, which stewards, replenishes and activates it by fostering research and providing accessibility.

357 The use of the word 'fonds' stems from one of the basic principles of archival science called *Respect des fonds*. It means "to group, without mixing them with others, the archives (documents of every kind) created by or coming from an administration, establishment, person, or corporate body. This grouping is called the *fonds* of the archives of that administration, establishment or person" (Duchain, 1983, pp. 1–2).

358 The museum designed procedures and workflows that facilitate the gathering of the documents produced by museum departments at the end of each institutional activity. These documents feed the category 'MACBA's Historical Fonds'.

359 The common cataloguing system for collection and archive employed by MACBA is the MuseumPlus collection management system. In consequence, the archival material was catalogued according to standards for musealia, which is different than those used for the archives.

360 The complexities of the system employed by MACBA were explained to me by CED employees Noemí Mases Blanch, Paloma Gueilburt and Elisabet Rodríguez in a series of personal conversations carried out during my research residency at MACBA in October/November 2018.

How does the structure introduced by MACBA differ from the traditional cataloguing systems used in museums? The difference lies in the way the information is structured and the scope of interaction between the documents. Usually the information about artworks is stored in collection management systems (CMS, see: Chapter 1, p. 67), such as the one used by Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (see: Chapter 4, p. 239). In most of the collection management systems used in museums today, documents related to the artworks, such as certificates of authenticity, instructions provided by the artist, lists of equipment necessary for displaying the piece, exhibition publications or conservation reports, can be attached to the artwork's record.³⁶¹ However, file size and permitted formats are usually restricted. The structure of information about the artwork in the CMS is thus fixed and linear: the entry for a particular artwork contains limited information that has been assigned to it. Documents that define the artwork are predetermined – one can add new ones or delete the existing ones, but the scope of the information that defines the artwork is constrained. By contrast, the system implemented by MACBA makes it possible to access documents that, although only indirectly related to the artwork, nevertheless provide data that are significant for its comprehension. Let's take as an example a list of fifty artworks featured in one exhibition. In a traditionally structured CMS this list would need to be attached to the record of every artwork separately. In MACBA's system this list is catalogued independently and appears in the search related to each of the listed artworks. An example of a document that defines the artwork is the recording of Danh Vo's public talk at MoMA (see: Chapter 3, p. 182), which, despite being created for reasons other than documenting the artwork collected by the museum, includes key information for a proper understanding of the work. In the traditional system this document, produced by employees responsible for public events who are not involved in collection care, would not be attached or linked to the CMS record of the artwork. At MACBA this kind of documents are separate archival entities that appear while searching by the name of the artist, title of the artwork or inventory number of the latter. Thanks to

361 The sole record of each musealium, depending of the complexity of the system, already includes a wealth of information. The template for CMS records at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam includes categories such as identification/production, physical characteristics, iconography, inscription/marks, associations, numbers/relationships, documentation, reproductions, condition/conservation, value, acquisition, disposal, ownership history, location, exhibitions and loans.

the structure, which treats artworks and archival material equally, MACBA's system allows for a deeper contextualisation of artworks and increases the possibility of constructing alternative narratives.

From the perspective of this research, so far the structure built by MACBA still presents several weak points, the most notable of which is related to the scope of the information comprised. The CED Archive does not encompass all the documentary material generated and kept within the museum. The archive of the collection department (or 'area' in MACBA's terms), which includes for instance artists' installation instructions and the majority of conservation-related documents, remains separate, and access to the information it contains is restricted. Furthermore, as there is not a system for archiving correspondence, the museum does not collect emails exchanged between stakeholders involved in the acquisition and/or presentation of an artwork, another aspect identified in this study as important for understanding processes behind the shaping of the musealium (see: Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the MACBA team has acknowledged these gaps as important to address within a series of challenges to take on in the long-term process of reinventing the institution. Experience and the potential of existing infrastructure built through the years offer a space to address these challenges methodologically.

Another member of *L'internationale* that experiments with the traditional museal classification systems and bridging the taxonomic separation of artworks and documents is the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Over last decade, the Van Abbemuseum has been at the forefront of critical thinking on what an art museum is, and how, for whom and with whom it (co)operates. This theoretical assessment is based on everyday museum practice that actively investigates how a museum can make stories with exhibitions, collections and archives that speak not just about the art itself or its societal frameworks, but interfere in these frameworks and their associated power structures (Lerm Hayes, 2015). In 2004 the museum started to test new ways to work with institutional resources – not only the collection, but also the archive and the library (Bishop, 2013).³⁶² In line with the theoretical underpinnings of

362 In 2004 the directorship of the museum was taken over by Charles Esche, one of the key actors of New Institutionalism.

MACBA's practices, the idea behind the novel approaches of the Van Abbemuseum was to look at and use the museum's collection as a whole without making distinctions between the artwork and the "paperwork around the artwork" (Esche, Franssen, & Aikens, 2012, p. 5). Museum research curator Steven ten Thije argues that this shift was necessary because art changed following the logic of the ready-made, and is now produced by installing things without as much attention to the quality of the "thing itself" (ten Thije, Andrews, & Cánepa Luna, 2013, p. 11). Hence, the strong similarity between "the artwork itself and a sort of collection or archive" (ten Thije et al., 2013), serves to blur the boundaries between traditional categories of collection and archive. However, while at MACBA the merging of categories was tested 'behind the scenes', at the Van Abbemuseum the main space of experimentation is the display. The Van Abbemuseum is not the only or the first art institution to bring archival material into the exhibition space, but they did it in an unorthodox way by elevating documents to the same level of importance as the artworks from the collection.³⁶³ In the series of research exhibitions called Living Archive, copies of the archival material were shown on the walls together with the artworks. Contracts and letters exchanged between artists and successive directors told stories about the circumstances of the acquisition, whereas other sources, such as reports or press clippings, contextualised the artwork within broader discourses.³⁶⁴ For example, Paul McCarthy's 1987 video *Family Tyranny/Cultural Soup*, in which the artist speaks in a grotesque way about a violent father-son relationship, is shown alongside documents presenting US child-abuse statistics, as well as discourses espoused by conservative groups instrumentalising the concept of 'family values' for political purposes (Franssen, Broos, & Cox, 2008). This approach shifted the emphasis away from the artist, his oeuvre and his place in the canon, to the

363 For more details related to the novel approaches of Van Abbemuseum see: Franssen, D. (February 2018). *The Archival Turn in Van Abbemuseum*. Presented at the seminar *The Boundary Condition: About the Archive and its Limits*, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). Retrieved from: <https://www.macba.cat/en/the-boundary-condition-discussion-with-mela-davila-and-diana-franssen>

364 The series of exhibitions 'Living Archive' curated by Diana Franssen was organised at Van Abbemuseum between 2005 and 2009. The most interesting episode of the series is *Mixed messages* (14/04/2008–14/09/2008), in which pieces from the museum collection were displayed alongside documentation. This combination permitted a reassessment of the artworks' significance as the outcome of social, political and economic factors. "Mixed messages can be considered a reconstruction, disassociating itself from the autonomy of art as something quite separate from the existing order" (Fletcher, Thije, Franssen, Esche, & Niemann, 2009, p. 99).

biography of the artwork and the context in which it was created and functioned, or, in other words, to change from one universal, linear art historical narrative to various site-specific and context-specific micro-stories (Esche, 2017; Esche et al., 2012). The relativity of the categories of artwork and document was also addressed in the latest display of the collection, which opened in 2017. In this show, the reproductions of the archival material, such as photographic documentation of past exhibitions, were hand-painted onto canvas, transforming them into artworks, while the artworks themselves were shown via exhibition copies, thus transforming them into documents.³⁶⁵

Although the practices employed by both museums to bridge the gap between the categories of artwork and document stem from different purposes than those that have shaped this study, they do follow similar conceptual underpinnings. Both examples illustrate a gradual recognition of the weakening barrier between objects and documents, collections and archives, along with the relativity of both categories in the framework of contemporary artistic practice. Building on the notion of 'artwork-related documentation' and the concept of anarchives as introduced in Chapter 1 (see. p. 59), and applying a conservation-oriented perspective, the next section presents a theoretical solution to the same challenge posed by the reconceptualization of a collectible as an anarchieve.

365 Exhibition *The Making of Modern Art* (29/04/2017–03/01/2021) curated by Christiane Berndes, Charles Esche, Steven ten Thije, in collaboration with the Museum of American Art, Berlin. For more information see: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/the-making-of-modern-art/> and Athanasiadis, E. *The Making of Modern Art: Thinking Outside the Box*. Retrieved from <https://vuartandculture.com/2017/06/27/the-making-of-modern-art-thinking-outside-the-box/>

5.3 The Museum Collection as a Collection of (An)archives

Unlike the archive, the collection as a concept has been inscribed in the notion of the museum since its origins. Today the collection continues to occupy a central position in the museum, and its particular status is legally supported.³⁶⁶ Therefore, to make these two museum domains – collection and archive – equal, I propose to merge them within the conceptual framework of the collection. For this purpose I will adopt and expand on the notion of ‘artwork-as-an-archive’ introduced by conservation theorist Hanna Hölling (2013a, 2015, 2018). Hölling’s concept encompasses both a physical and a virtual sphere of an artwork, where the former contains “all documents, leftovers and tangible materials produced by the artwork” and the latter “entails tacit knowledge, skills, and memory of everyone involved in the process of shaping the work” (Hölling, 2015, p. 86). This combining of the physical and the conceptual under one umbrella concept is similar to the notion of “artwork-related documentation” that I have put forward in this book. The parallel continues with Hölling’s affirmation that the archive determines the nature of artworks, i.e. that the decisions that influence the future embodiment of artworks are made on the basis of the archive (Hölling, 2015). Given that subsequent manifestations of an artwork produced on the basis of the archive in turn enter the archive and transform it, the archive evolves as a dynamic entity directed towards the future shape of the artwork (Hölling, 2015). This theoretical construct embraces the artwork’s possibility for and the inevitability of change and re-defines the conservator’s role as that of “maintaining the artwork’s identity through the interpretation and actualisation of the archive” (Hölling, 2013). Although Hölling’s concept was proposed principally in the context of media art, in my

366 Currently, there are multiple parallel, on-going discussions among museum professionals around the very notion of the museum, its definition and its expansion to embrace non-collecting institutions. In 2019 ICOM launched the Museum Definition Initiative to collect proposals for a new definition of museum from organisation members. See: *Museum Definition – ICOM*. (2019). Retrieved from <https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>. My own standpoint follows the definition by theoretical museologist Peter van Mensch for whom a museum is “a permanent museological institution, which preserves collections of ‘physical documents’ and generates knowledge about them” (Van Mensch, 1992 quoted in Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 58). For the legal underpinnings of museum collections’ special status see: e.g. Warren, J. (Ed.). (1996). *The Legal Status of Museum Collections in the United Kingdom*. London: Museums & Galleries Commission. Retrieved from <http://www.sanhs.org/Documents/LegalStatusofMuseumCollections.pdf>

view it is also relevant to contemporary art regarded as the paradigm of artistic practice (see Chapter 1, p. 36).³⁶⁷ The combination of these two concepts – the artwork-related documentation and the artwork seen as an archive – leads to the re-conceptualisation of the museum collection as a collection of archives. However, expanding the notion of ‘artwork-related documentation’ to ‘artwork-as-an-archive’ requires the inclusion of a critical reflexion on the structure the archive, as introduced following Zielinski’s notion of anarchives described in Chapter 1 (see: p. 78).

The conceptualisation of the artwork as an ‘(an)archive’ supports the open-ended character of contemporary artworks as well as their intrinsic incompleteness, partiality and fragmentation. Similarly, the archive will always be lacking or can always be added to. According to Jacques Derrida’s vision of the archive, as the gaps and absences are integral to its identity and also difficult to prove, they might also be seen as a form of evidence (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, see: Chapter 1, p. 77). Therefore, within the archival space, there is no threat of over-documenting. On the contrary, as Rinehart (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014) has observed, collecting as many stories as possible increases the accuracy of the artwork’s representation (see: Chapter 4, p. 222).

To suggest, as this thesis does, that a museologised contemporary artwork might be conceptualised as an (an)archive is to view it as an open-ended set with a rhizomatic structure and a dynamic system containing interrelated documents (tokens) that represent an artwork. Particular elements of the archive create knowledge by interacting with each other, and this interaction is activated by means of research. Why then might the model of artwork-as-(an)archive facilitate conservation and decision making regarding the artwork’s future shape? On a conceptual level, the artwork-as-(an)archive grants the possibility of collecting and caring for contemporary artworks beyond their material embodiment. Gathering together the evidence of an artwork’s conception, as well as the knowledge produced around it during its ‘life’, makes it possible to represent its multi-levelled, complex nature. Although the archive’s own limitations prevent it from fully representing the artwork, the accumulation of documentation allows gaps to be identified and addressed, and, more importantly, makes it possible to foster relations

367 Hölling (2013) acknowledged the possibility of using the concept of artwork-as-an-archive for other categories of art.

between individual elements of the set. The artwork-as-(an)archive is a common source of information about the artwork that facilitates equal access to and distribution of information, and prevents the exercise of authority based on the appropriation of knowledge. This non-hierarchical (un)structure offers space for flexibility and (some) creativity in shaping the artwork-as-(an)archive on a case-by-case basis.

Yet, there are still questions that need to be answered regarding the practical implications of the model of the artwork-as-(an)archive and why its application might help institutions to safeguard the continuation of contemporary artworks from their collections. Firstly, the artwork-as-(an)archive model offers the possibility of switching from a single governing narrative of what the artwork is and does, to various micro-stories that foster alternative interpretations and broaden possibilities concerning the artwork's future shape.

Secondly, it helps shift the concept of conservation within the museum from a set of object-oriented actions to a collaborative effort encompassing the whole institution. In the framework of the artwork-as-(an)archive model, a musealised artwork ceases to consist only of art objects in order to embrace documents gathered and produced by the artwork's stakeholders. In turn, the artwork's continuation relies not only on conservators but also, and explicitly, on other institutional actors. The artwork-as-(an)archive model emphasises the contribution to and responsibility for the perpetuation of an artwork as the common task of a long list of figures: curators and educators who collect, produce and promote interpretations; archivists and registrars who gather and organise knowledge produced within the institution; librarians who take care of information produced outside the museum walls; photographers and audio-visual technicians who document and install artworks in galleries; event coordinators responsible for producing and staging the artworks, etc. The emphasis on conservation as a common task might help to overcome the divisions between different organisational domains, thereby making it a more attainable reality. Moreover, the artwork seen as an (an)archive can become a space for collaboration that encourages all stakeholders to take an active part in conserving the artworks collected.

Thirdly, the model pushes museums to reconsider the act of acquisition as more than just purchasing art objects, and extending it to the production and gathering of documentation within the process, and consequently, to having this reflected in the acquisition budget.³⁶⁸ From this perspective, without collecting the stories that carry the artwork's identity, the acquisition would not be considered complete.

Fourthly, it fosters a need to build an infrastructure to facilitate collecting understood as documenting, and to create a space for documents to interact with each other as a network. And finally, it helps to embrace the complementation and activation of the archive through research within the framework of collection care and locates it at the same level of priorities as the state-of-art hi-tech storage that hosts the art objects. Hence, it supports the recognition of research as a full-fledged conservation tool for safeguarding the artwork's continuation while respecting its changeability.

How would the application of the artwork-as-(an)archive model facilitate the collection and conservation of the specific artworks studied in this book? Although any answer to this question is mere speculation, it may serve to illustrate my proposal and assess its validity. Starting with Danh Vo's 'Chandeliers project', regarding it as an archive might allow the project as a whole to be collected, without focusing on a specific artefact. Although particular chandeliers would still be owned by separate museums, the institutions could gather the documents that relate to all of them, showing the commonalities and differences in the way the artist assembles them on display, together with contextual information illuminating the artist's choices. The creation of this sort of documentation could be a common effort of all three institutions, and as such a factor fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, a possibility that will be discussed later on in this chapter. Looking at Kruger's *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)* as an archive could encourage the museum to gather documents that are essential for understanding the artwork's nature starting from the point the institution decided to acquire it. Furthermore, it would foster the systematic documentation of the consecutive manifestations of the piece, including the way the artist progressively

368 In this regard the Guggenheim Museum in NY set a precedent by, according to Rinehart and Ippolito (2014, p. 273), earmarking about 15 per cent of the acquisition budget for its 2002 Internet art commissions for an endowment meant to fund future re-creations of the works.

adapted it to the architectural context. And finally, it might provide a space to mediate with the artist as to the institution's future usage of the artwork, and, already at the time of acquisition, to have discussed its possible futures. The advantage of the archive as a site for negotiation is that it provides the necessary contextual information and references that need to be taken into account. In both cases the application of the artwork-as-(an)archive model would foster collaboration between museums and artists, as well as the systematic documentation of this collaboration, and would empower museums to employ the artist interview regularly, not only as a method for documenting but also as a tool for collecting contemporary artworks.

Despite having different *raison d'être*, the experiments of MACBA and Van Abbemuseum and the artwork-as-(an)archive model featured in this dissertation overlap in several ways. Concepts and practices rooted in New Institutionalism developed as a response to the artistic strategies of contemporary art, changing relations between museums and society at large, and coming to understand art not as a 'thing in itself', but as existing in dialogue with the social sphere (Aikens, Lange, Seijdel, & Thije, 2016). As such, they invite users to think critically and allow them to construct their own narratives around the artworks collected. Although the artwork-as-(an)archive model was introduced not as a means to reinvent art institutions but as a strategy for securing artworks' continuation, it shares conceptual underpinnings with practices introduced here. Similarly to the cataloguing and display practices of MACBA and Van Abbemuseum, the reconceptualisation of the artwork as an (an) archive allows us to reconsider traditional museum classification principles and work towards the accessibility, transparency and activation of museum holdings. It opens up the institutional space to a multiplicity of perspectives and dialogue by rejecting a single governing narrative.

Instead of dictating what the artwork is, what it does and how it should be perpetuated, it offers space for collecting and producing diverse, often competing micro-stories. Moreover, the model of artwork-as-(an)archive complies with *L'Internationale's* interest in establishing a new, more proactive relationship between museums and the societies that host them. The artwork seen as an (an)archive constitutes a space for collaboration, allowing the public to take part in securing the continuation of contemporary artistic production within the institutional framework, an idea that will be developed later on

in this chapter. Emphasising the commonalities between the concerns discussed and examined in the curatorial field, such as those of *L'Internationale*, and the conservation-oriented issues presented in this book, might foster collaboration between these two areas on developing theoretical frameworks to make the institutional collecting and safeguarding of contemporary art more efficient and democratic. The artwork-as-(an) archive model could be the missing link between these two spheres, and the trigger for critical institutional practices like those of MACBA and Van Abbemuseum to take into account conservation, which at present has largely been left out of their approach.

5.4 Setting up the Archive: Creating space for collaboration

To function in the museum, the artwork-as-(an)archive model requires an infrastructure that supports the production, management and activation of the documentation collected. The contemporary conceptualisation of the archive as developed in the writings of philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben emphasises the importance of the archive's infrastructure by suggesting that the archive stands for both the entirety of what can be expressed and documented, as well as all of the technologies that support the archive's media (Zielinski et al., 2014). For Derrida, the methods for transmitting information shape the knowledge that is produced in the archive, or in other words the structure of the archive determines what can actually be archived (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). This is especially true of digital archives, where documents and contents are inextricably intertwined with the system of production, storage and organisation (Dekker, 2017). As media art historian Ina Blom has observed, "once the archive is based on networked data circulation, its emphatic form dissolves into the coding and protocol layer, into electronic circuits or data flow" (Lundemo, Røssaak, & Blom, 2016, p. 12). Following this line of thought, and drawing on the traditional structure of the museum archive, this section provides examples of existing, even established solutions which resemble the artwork-as-(an) archive model. As such, they might help to comprehend the advantages of the model's structure and suggest how the artwork-as-(an)archive model might be set up in the institutional setting.

The basic unit for organising the institutional documentation of musealia is the ‘object file’ or ‘object dossier’. *The Handbook for Museums* defines it as a “careful listing of all actions or activities impacting a particular object in the museum’s collections including all conservation, restoration, exhibition, loan or other uses of the object” (Edson & Dean, 1994, p. 292). The concept of ‘object file’ is rooted in the pre-digital regime of documentation and therefore is primarily thought of as an assembly of different types of physical documents brought together in one cardboard folder.³⁶⁹ It can hold textual documents both structured (e.g. forms) and unstructured (e.g. reports, letters, handwritten notes). It may also contain photocopies of texts from exhibition catalogues or articles, legal documents such as bills and invoices, as well as photographs. Sometimes the ‘object file’ can consist of more than just paper documents, such as the fabric sample in the case of Balka’s 211x170x125, 190x129x73 from the Kröller-Müller Museum collection (see: Chapter 2 p. 93). In the case of traditional analogue archives, the format of the cardboard folder may be seen as a potential limitation on what can enter the archive.³⁷⁰

This book’s concept of artwork seen as an archive is akin to the ‘object file’, since both gather documents taking the artwork as a classification principle, provide a space for assembling these documents together, and make them interact with each other. In various case studies presented here, the ‘object file’ was the entry point for the investigation of a musealised artwork; however, in each of the institutions examined this folder is organised differently. In some, like Tate and Centre Pompidou, it has a well-established structure, while in others, like the Kröller-Müller Museum, it is more

369 The guidelines of Sustainable Collections Projects of Central NSW advise on setting up an object file as follows: “The object file can be any type of folder. You can anchor the pages at the top left hand corner with a brass paper fastener or spike, available from stationary shops or newsagents. Alternatively plastic sleeves help keep the information in order. If keeping original material such as historic photos or an instruction book on the file, always put it in a secure pocket or sleeve” (Winkworth, 2009, p. 1).

370 This is not always the case. Some museum archives might also be repositories of leftovers, spare parts, exhibition copies, etc., for example the conservation archive of ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe) as described by Hölling (2013, p. 223). However, the inclusion of objects in the collection-related archive that do not fit in the pre-established archiving format might result in limited access to these ‘oversized’ documents. Because of their physical properties they need to be stored separately, for example in storage where the access is regulated by restrictive procedures.

of a compilation of all documents assessed as important by various museum employees involved in collection care. In both cases, the character of the information comprised in the object file is different from the data held in collection management systems, where data are entered by filling in pre-established forms (Barok et al., 2019).

Although the cardboard folder with paper documents is still a predominant system of gathering documentation about artworks collected in art museums, some institutions have already switched to digital technologies. The transition from purely analogue to entirely digital is a long process that museums need to divide into various intermediate stages. Currently, many institutions simultaneously gather and store documentation in analogue and digital form.³⁷¹ While ‘printable’ documents are stored in paper form, non-printable ones like audio files are kept in digital files on the internal museum server.³⁷² Some institutions, such as the SMA, have decided to employ solutions that allow them to manage, store and efficiently access all digital documents (see: Chapter 4, p. 240).

It is actually the digital infrastructure that allows the artwork-as-(an)archive theoretical model to be implemented in the museum setting. It affords an unprecedented capacity for accumulating information and for this information to network and to be mobilised for user inquiries. Moreover, the digital archive promotes the accessibility and democratisation of its content. Although the starting point and inspiration for the artwork-as-(an)archive model proposed in this dissertation is the analogue ‘object file’, the potential for interaction between documents is fully unleashed in ‘360°’ – the digital document management system used at the SMA (see: Chapter 4, p. 175). From the organisational point of view, the ‘Objectdossier’ (360°’s digital equivalent of the ‘object file’) resembles a non-hierarchical anarchival structure. It has no categories and therefore all kinds of digital documents associated with the artwork might be deposited

371 This is the case of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, where, as of 2017, most of the documentation produced in the pre-digital era is still kept in analogue format. The majority of the documents stored in 360° were created after the implementation of the document management system.

372 In some institutions analogue systems for organising information have led to situations in which digital-born information, such as emails, need to be printed out in order to be archived.

there directly and hyperlinked to one to another.³⁷³ One of the elements that transforms this set from a passive accumulation of data into the “living documentation” described by Briet (Briet, 2006, p. 41; C. Macdonald, 2009) is its powerful search engine, which renders information accessible through combinations of keywords.³⁷⁴ As with most of the technologies available today, 360° has its shortcomings, such as limitations on file size and lack of support for a number of file formats. From a long-term preservation perspective, the fact that it runs on commercial technology constitutes a serious disadvantage.³⁷⁵ Moreover, many employees do not find the system to be user-friendly or intuitive.³⁷⁶ However, the logic of unstructured storage of information embedded in a wide variety of different documents searchable by keywords illustrates the intended organisation of the artwork-as-(an)archive model.

Another noteworthy tool for creating digital archives of contemporary artworks in an institutional setting that is currently being discussed and tested in the framework of contemporary art collection care is MediaWiki, the publishing software developed for Wikipedia.³⁷⁷ One of the institutions pioneering experimentation with this tool is SFMOMA, which started to use MediaWiki to document their complex media installations. A testing ground for MediaWiki as a documentation platform was Julia Scher’s multi-channel video and sound installation *Predictive Engineering* (1993–present) (Barok et al., 2019), which since 1993 has been redesigned together with the artist for three distinct locations in the evolving museum.³⁷⁸ In order to maintain the concept of the work, the installation setup and media have been

373 Through hyperlinking it is also possible to circumvent the only category imposed by the archive, namely the particular artwork, by connecting information on various artworks, for instance those made by a single artist.

374 Briet’s approach to documentation is explained in detail in Chapter 1 (see: p. 73).

375 In the field of digital preservation, technologies based on open-source software are preferred over those based on software developed for commercial purposes, see: e.g. Dekker, 2010.

376 Personal conversations with SMA employees carried out during the fieldwork conducted between February and June 2017.

377 For more information about MediaWiki see: <https://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki>.

378 The documentation and re-installation of Julia Scher’s *Predictive Engineering* was part of SFMOMA’s project “The Artist Initiative” (see: Chapter 1, p. 59). For detailed information about the artwork’s history and the project related to documenting it, see: <https://www.sfmoma.org/julia-scher-predictive-engineering/>

updated for each iteration to stay abreast of the latest developments in surveillance technology (Barok et al., 2019). The artwork's MediaWiki page features curatorial texts, installation instructions, equipment lists, descriptions of previous iterations, audio and video interviews, press reviews, correspondence, etc.³⁷⁹ This assemblage aims to document the artwork and secure its future installations by bringing together curatorial, conservation and technical perspectives. As SFMOMA Media Conservator Martina Haidvogel has observed, given that Predictive Engineering does not exist anymore after being deinstalled, its MediaWiki archive might stand in for the artwork while it is not on view (Clark, Haidvogel, Frieling, & Scher, 2017). What differentiates the structure of the MediaWiki page from 360°'s 'Objectdossier' is the existence of a predominant (though collectively written) narrative, the need for an editor, the reliance on categories, and the need to employ these categories in order to access the files linked to the wiki.³⁸⁰ Although MediaWiki maintains files in a flat hierarchy, which means that each one is on the same level of importance as any other wiki page, access to these files is embedded in the internal structure of the page's menu.³⁸¹ Still, the system is flexible and supports collaboration – it is configurable and adaptable to the circumstances of the artwork and comes with version-tracking functions. The latter, together with a built-in system for referencing (Barok et al., 2019), make it possible to understand how the content was shaped, who shaped it, and where the entered information comes from. The collaboration also includes the artist – besides the fact that the content was shaped in collaboration with the artist under the aegis of the 'Artist Initiative' project, the structure of the template was also altered according to the artist's particular vocabulary. The subsequent manifestations of Predictive Engineering are documented on sub-pages entitled 'episodes' (as the artist prefers to call them) instead of 'iterations' (as established in the basic template) (Barok et

379 As of today, the content of SFMOMA's MediaWiki platform is not available online. This description is based on the research conducted by NACCA researchers Dušan Barok and Maria Teodoraki at SFMOMA, as well as online sources (see: e.g. https://blog.wikimedia.org/2016/07/07/sfmoma-mediawiki/?fbclid=IwAR3YLd_A-3sYoVwFo6siVZ6gZZaMFiuGoL5vAxS5OJrX-KtmZEj6g1rPZg). Recently a summary of Barok's investigation has been published in *Studies in Conservation*, see: Barok et al., 2019.

380 The basic page template of SFMOMA's MediaWiki is divided into the following categories: curatorial description, technical narrative, components, exhibitions, installation, iterations, manual and hardware information, and references (Barok et al., 2019).

381 The insights into the structure of MediaWiki were provided by Dušan Barok in a series of personal conversations carried out between 2018 and 2019.

al., 2019). To conclude: whereas its organisation goes against the non-hierarchical anarchival structure of the artwork-as-(an)archive model, SFMOMA's MediaWiki is another example of a collaborative archive built across departmental divisions and in partnership with the artist.

Returning to MACBA, their conceptual abolishment of the division between artworks and documents, described in the previous section, led to the development of further practical solutions. Following the drive to disseminate what the museum termed 'Patrimonio MACBA' (see: p. 283), the institution is currently developing an online repository, designed as an infrastructure for the preservation, management and dissemination of digital assets that will provide broad access to its resources.³⁸² The repository is based on the logic of cataloguing described before and therefore covers both the collection and the archive.³⁸³ Also, as in the collection management system, its structure allows records from both domains to be cross-linked. The repository is also envisioned as a collaborative space, since the content is produced by many participants; however, similarly to the SFMOMA's MediaWiki, it requires a manager who assigns records to particular categories. As of November 2018, the repository was accessible to all museum employees on their desk computers as well as to external researchers through computers located in the museum library.³⁸⁴

It is important to point out that all of the examples of the infrastructure for organising information in artwork archives described in the foregoing sections – the cardboard 'object file', SMA's 360°, SFMOMA's MediaWiki and MACBA's Centre for Study and Documentation and repository – originate at institutions where the collection

382 For more information about the repository see: *Repositori Digital MACBA*. Retrieved from <https://www.macba.cat/en/library#tab-38926>

383 Contrary to its conceptual underpinnings, the structure of the repository renders this division visible. The two main categories (called "communities") in the repository are "Fons artistic", which contains entries related to the works from the MACBA collection, and "Fons documental", which includes material from the CED Archive and Library.

384 MACBA is planning to provide online access to the repository in the coming months. As of December 2018, the team responsible for the repository was discussing the establishment of different levels of accessibility to each specific type of content. The system provides controlled access with credentials for viewing and downloading restricted content, such as copyrighted videos or information regarding loans and collaborations with other bodies and institutions.

and the archive are, nevertheless, still separate domains.³⁸⁵ The artwork-as-(an)archive model's proposed total erasure of this division, by considering art objects as documents, implies re-conceptualising museum storage as another institutional micro-archive. Given that the artwork-as-(an)archive model is conceived as virtual and adjusted to the affordances of digital environments, the physical art objects held by the museum can be included in it via digital representations, for example photographs, videos, 3D scans, etc. However, this inclusion is more difficult if an artwork is distributed between different institutions, as in the case of Danh Vo's 'Chandeliers Project' (see: Chapter 3). Each system presented in previous sections follows the logic of centralisation, where all the information is gathered together in one physical or virtual space. However, this is not the only way an archive could be organised in the digital era.

Ideally, the 'Chandeliers Project' seen as an archive would be an interinstitutional one, where the information created by a particular museum would remain under the custody of this institution, but at the same time be present in the archives of the other museums (see: Chapter 3, p. 212).³⁸⁶ This approach is akin to post-custodial archive theory, which proposes institutions be re-positioned from custodians of archival records to stewards or managers of records that are located elsewhere (Kelleher, 2017). The post-custodial archive paradigm stands in opposition to the traditional theory and practice of archiving based on physical custody of records, and recognises that information is not always contingent on its physical form. It is rooted in the establishment of collaborative relationships and the drive to overcome the notions of ownership and exclusiveness in relation to the broadly defined notion of heritage.³⁸⁷ However, to make the archive interinstitutional, the documents need to be accessible and the institutions must be open to collaboration, which, as the next section demonstrates, is not always the case.

385 Although at MACBA this division was conceptually abolished, it still governs the organisation of the institution.

386 A similar idea is expressed through Rinehart and Ippolito's concept of 'Interarchive'. The initial postulations of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) also resemble this model (see: Introduction, p. 11).

387 The concept of a post-custodial era in archiving was coined by archivist and theorist F. Gerald Ham, see: Ham, F. G. (1981). *Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era*. *The American Archivist*, 44(3), 207–216. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.44.3.6228121p01m8k376>

5.5 Accessing the Archive: Sharing its content

The issue of accessibility challenges both key concepts discussed in this dissertation – the artist interview and the model of artwork-as-(an)archive. While the definition of the artist interview informed by oral history theory as proposed in Chapter 1 (p. 61) assumes that the outcome of the interview is transformed into a stable, accessible source, my experience conducting fieldwork has shown that this is often not the case. Research as the way to activate the archive stands at the core of the artwork-as-(an) archive model, and the availability of all stories that enter the archive conditions its purpose. Given that access to the overall documentation produced around collected artworks is often controlled and restricted, in order to implement the artwork-as-(an) archive model, and, as I argue, to secure the perpetuation of contemporary artworks in an institutional setting, all documents related to artworks from the collection hosted within the museum must be made accessible to as many potential users as possible.³⁸⁸

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Tate, like all public institutions in the UK, has the obligation to provide access to all the information it holds.³⁸⁹ Although an impressive amount of data is already shared with the public on the museum's website, the majority of the documentation on the collection's artworks is kept in and managed by Tate Archive and accessible to researchers in the Tate Britain Library Reading Room upon request. The procedure is standardised, and it takes up to 20 days to respond to the application. Tate states on its website that the aforementioned Freedom

388 This is a challenging endeavour, especially because it often goes against current legislation. However, as the example from Tate presented later on in this section demonstrates, there are solutions to effectively limit access to bits of legally protected information such as personal data. The experiments with bringing the documentation to the exhibition space led by Van Abbemuseum proves that the disclosure of archival information is not only possible but also efficient as a curatorial strategy. The issue of public access to documentation held by museums is discussed by various conservation theorists, especially in the context of media art, see: e.g. Wharton, 2015, as well as the concept of Open Museum fostered by Rinehart and Ippolito (2014).

389 See: Freedom of information, Tate website, retrieved from: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/who-we-are/freedom-of-information>; and also Freedom of Information Act 2000, retrieved from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents>.

of Information Act sets out a series of exemptions.³⁹⁰ How does the application of exemptions affect the accessibility of the artwork-related documentation? Before the consultation, the requested documents (such as object files, which consists of ‘Acquisition Files’ and ‘Conservation Files’), are examined by an employee of the Library, Archive or Public Records in order to detect potentially sensitive data. Employees from the Conservation Department often inspect the Conservation File prior to release.³⁹¹ Documents containing information that is deemed confidential are photocopied, and the questionable sentences or paragraphs redacted. The numeric code of the applicable exemption is provided on each ‘censored’ page.

Blacked-out portions appear throughout the files consulted at Tate for the research we have seen on works by Mirosław Balka (see: Chapter 2, p. 141). Often it was easy to guess what type of information the redacted text contained, and in most cases the redacting appeared to be appropriate.³⁹² In other instances though, for unclear reasons the ‘censorship’ affected documents directly related to the artwork and essential for its understanding. A note in the condition report of one of the works investigated states that the artist provided “very precise and eloquent installation instructions”.³⁹³ Also, the table of contents on the cover of the Conservation File mentions an ‘Installation File’. However, the indicated page contained only the following statement: “9 pieces [pages] have been removed from this file. Closed under Freedom of Information Act. Exemption: s31”.³⁹⁴ During the time period in question it was common for Balka to

390 “If an exemption does apply, the public authority must state exactly which exemption it is applying to withhold information and explain clearly, and with reference to the information, why that particular exemption is relevant”. (Freedom of Information Act 2000, retrieved from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents>)

391 Information obtained from a former Tate employee in a conversation during the fieldwork conducted at the museum in January 2017.

392 For example personal data. In most of the museums the price paid for the artwork in the acquisition process as well as the value of the work is considered confidential information as well. However, it does not necessarily need to be confidential, as Van Abbemuseum’s “Museum Index” project proved. As a part of the exhibition “The Collection Now” (02/11/2013–17/12/2017), the museum displayed a graphic overview of works from the collection in relation to their value. See: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-index/>.

393 Laurenson P., Sculpture Conservation Preliminary Condition Report, 16 January 1995, Conservation File T06960, Tate Archive, London.

394 “Exemption S(2)31: Law enforcement”, see: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/section/31>

provide handwritten instructions accompanied by detailed drawings.³⁹⁵ Why was this information classified? Were the handwritten notes in imperfect English simply too challenging for the reviewer to decipher and assess?

External researchers' ability to consult documentation related to the artworks from the collection varies from institution to institution and the policy of accessibility is rarely transparent, but rather is applied on a case-by-case basis.³⁹⁶ US museums are less keen to provide access to documents that are considered internal than European public institutions, which are legally obliged to do so.³⁹⁷ However, even in European public museums the practices vary and, due to infrastructure differences, are rather difficult to compare. For instance, in many institutions documentation generated for conservation purposes is categorised as confidential and stored separately from the object files kept in the collection archive.³⁹⁸ However, the category of conservation-related documentation is not a fixed one – the artist interview is labelled as such in some institutions but not in others. The Van Abbemuseum, which does not have a conservation department,

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- 395 See: e.g. instructions provided by Balka for 211x170x125, 190x129x73 (1993) from the Kröller-Müller Museum collection (see: Chapter 2, p. 121 and also Figure 22).
- 396 By researcher I mean every person interested in studying the artwork. However, it is also important to mention that it is much easier to apply for access to museum documentation for researchers with documented institutional affiliation (preferably university affiliation) than for a simple art lover.
- 397 During the research carried out at MoMA (see: Chapter 3, p. 198) I was allowed to consult only a small part of the existing documentation. My request for more information on what types of documents are included in the classified section was rejected by the employee at the Study Center.
- 398 The notion of confidentiality in relation to conservation is still debated among conservators. Whereas some conservators feel that the condition and treatment reports should be classified, others promote the idea that free exchange of information serves the preservation of artworks, and therefore access to these types of records should never be denied. Even though laws around confidentiality are straightforward, perceptions of the issue within the profession are not. For a more detailed account, see: Stavroudis, C., Brandow, W., & Kruth, L. (1986). Confidentiality of Records: Perceptions and Reality. *WAAC Newsletter*, 8(2), 1–4. Retrieved from <https://cool.conservation-us.org/waac/wn/wno8/wno8-2/wno8-202.html>. For a reflection on the relative absence of discussions about this issue in the context of contemporary art, see: Learner, T. (2008). The object in transition. *A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art. CeROArt*, 2, 6–10. Retrieved from <http://ceroart.revues.org/425>. An example of separating conservation-related documentation from the rest of artwork-related documentation is SMA's 360°, which does not include reports produced in the conservation department. For a more detailed description of documentation practices at SMA, see: Chapter 4, p. 240.

declares that artist interviews, which are a part of their standard workflow, are intended only for internal purposes and are therefore not accessible to external users.³⁹⁹ At MACBA, artist interviews are from the outset conducted with public accessibility in mind, and are often shared on the museum website in an edited version.⁴⁰⁰ One of the limitations for establishing norms of accessibility is the absence of rules determining which documents enter the collection archive and which do not. To be able to use the archive one needs to learn its logic, structure and functionality (Hölling, 2018), which are often not clear even internally. Furthermore, access to the documents produced around the artworks from the collection is often restricted not only for outsiders, but also for museum personnel. In some museums the conservation archive is off-limits to curators and vice versa. For example, at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the conservation-related documentation is not included in 360° and is difficult to access, even internally. These constraints are also visible in the way institutions conceptualise their infrastructure for collecting artwork-related documentation, which is generally designed exclusively for internal use without providing public access.⁴⁰¹

5.6 The Artist Interview as an Interpretative Tool for the Artwork-as-an-Archive: Reassessing the ideal

Chapter 1 featured the ‘model’ artist interview, informed by oral history theory and the thoughts of various practitioners from the field of conservation, my own experience included (see: Chapter 1, p. 61). The artist interview was framed there as an oral, semi-structured, guided conversation with an artist concerning a specific artwork from the museum collection. Its purpose is to identify and document the features of a contemporary artwork that have been indicated as key to the artwork’s understanding,

399 Interview with Van Abbemuseum Head of Collections (C. Berndes, in-person interview, November 21, 2018).

400 Interview with MACBA Head of Conservation (Silvia Noguera, personal communication, 29 October 2018). *Fons de documentació audiovisual* (Audiovisual Documentation Collection) is a documentary series in which artists who are part of the MACBA Collection talk about their work, see: e.g. *Interview with Antoni Miralda*, Retrieved from <https://www.macba.cat/en/video-fons-miralda-holy-food>.

401 Besides the MACBA on-line repository (see: p. 299), all solutions described in the previous sections are developed for internal use only.

namely conceptuality, contextuality, processuality and media variability as sanctioned by the artist. In line with an oral history perspective and because of the method's multi-levelled subjectivity, the artist interview as a source is seen more as an assemblage of stories than as an accumulation of facts. In the course of the research this ideal artist interview has been tested against various case studies conducted in different institutional settings. What, then, are the conclusions of this examination?

The artist interview is an efficient method for documenting the constellation of meanings that are essential for grasping the multidimensionality of a contemporary artwork. It is a valuable documentary source as well as an important reference for decisions on the possible futures of institutionally collected artworks. It is also a valid source of artist's sanctions – direct or indirect indications of how the work should be displayed, used and cared for (see: Chapter 2, p. 108). And yet, the interview as a source is contingent on multiple conditions, such as the accuracy of the preparatory research, the character of the relationship between the artist and the institution, or the development of the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Moreover, it might prove ambiguous at the time of the consultation, which implies the necessity to interpret the information it contains.⁴⁰² For the informed management of an artwork's continuation, the artist interview needs to be combined and juxtaposed with additional sources, presenting the perspective of the artist but also of the other stakeholders involved in the artwork's career.⁴⁰³ Various statements by the same artist, including those expressed in interviews, may provide different, often competing information. Therefore, although it often yields unique, in-depth insights into the artwork's nature authorised by its creator, the interview is not more valid for understanding, interpretation and decision making than other documents with information that allows one to grasp the artwork's nature. Following these observations, of which the majority

402 Most of the observations described in this paragraph confirm the remarks and recommendations from existing literature on the subject. See: e.g. Beerkens et al., 2012; Stigter, 2009, 2011.

403 The introduction to *The Artist Interview For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art: Guidelines and Practice* (see: Chapter 1, p. 47) mentions that “information from the interview can also be tested against other sources if there are doubts about material-technical or other factual information” (Beerkens et al., 2012, p. 15). This dissertation proposes to replace ‘can’ with ‘must’, as consulting other sources is necessary not only for verifying factual information, but also for understanding the artist's opinions and perspectives. In my view juxtaposition and comparison with other sources is key to an informed use of the interview as a source.

have already been acknowledged in the field of contemporary art conservation, I propose that the issues related to using the artist interview in the museum, traced throughout this dissertation, are not intrinsic to the method but caused by the context in which it is used, namely the museum as such.

The ideal artist interview proposed in Chapter 1 is rarely employed in day-to-day museum practice. Chapter 4 indicates two causes of this condition (see: p. 272). Firstly, in the museum the artist interview pertains to the domain of documentation, which is seen as subordinate to that of the collection, and as such is not considered a priority when allocating institutional resources. Secondly, the relationship between museums and artists is often not based on partnership but rather relies on both parties' often-conflicting interests and sense of authority. This dissertation offers two solutions that might enhance the institutional use and effectiveness of the artist interview, both as a method and as a source. The first one is the reconceptualisation of the interview's outcome, from a source of factual information to an assemblage of stories, and the second is the framework of the artwork-as-(an)archive model as developed throughout this book.

According to current values, principles and laws governing the field of heritage and visual art, including conservation, artists largely retain their authority over musealised artworks.⁴⁰⁴ Therefore, although the relativity, contingency and subjectivity of the interview as a source has been broadly acknowledged in the field of conservation,

404 The call for the artist's will to be respected appears in many professional regulations, such as the Code of Ethics provided by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, which states: "All actions of the conservation professional must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it" (AIC 1994). The artist's authority over his or her work is also expressed in legal regulations. In most European countries artists retain a continuing non-proprietary interest in their works even after they have consigned them to others. This *droit moral* specifies that the artists or their heirs have the right to stop artworks from being mishandled or subjected to ridicule, for example being hung upside down or displayed in demeaning conditions (Zolberg, 1992). The Visual Artists Rights Act is a US federal law adopted in 1990 that protects the moral rights of artists. Moral rights include the right to attribution and the right to integrity. These rights legally guarantee an artist's association with a work he or she has created, and protects that work from modification which could tarnish the artist's reputation (Sheesley, 2007).

the reliability and even truthfulness of the artist's account has been perceived by many as a problem at the time of conservation decision making (Davies & Heuman, 2004; Sommermeyer, 2011; Stigter, 2004; van Saaze, 2009a).⁴⁰⁵ The proposed re-conceptualisation of the interview's outcome – from source of factual information to assemblage of stories – enhances the critical distance from what the artist has actually said in the interview. The difference between facts and stories is akin to the distinction between testimony and narrative in the framework of oral history, where testimony is the account of events seen and witnessed, and a narrative is a story about oneself in relationship to these events (Portelli, 2018). From a practical perspective, this re-conceptualisation is an important reminder of the fact that the interview is a source for the artwork's custodians to interpret as they build their arguments, and never a set of instructions for them to follow at face value. It offers a sound framework for questioning, if necessary, the artist's opinion or will. Furthermore, discussing stories rather than facts allows us to set aside such issues as contradicting or competing artist's statements or the factual reliability of the narrative.

Since working with oral history interviews means operating on many different levels (Portelli, 2018), the call to use the artist interview to collect stories does not diminish the importance of the facts embedded in the stories. Interviews will be examined in the future as a source of facts to reconstruct the events of the past, for example by historians, biographers, etc. However, these facts need to be seen through the lens of cultural dependencies, that is, as connected to the narratives and the cultural and linguistic constructs generated around them (Portelli, 2018). Finally, if the task of interviewing is understood as collecting stories related to the conceptual dimension of the artwork, the artist interview ceases to be an auxiliary method and becomes a conservation tool in its own right. It makes it possible to actually preserve the artwork by providing information about its processuality, conceptuality, media-variability and contextuality – key features for the understanding of a contemporary artwork's nature that, if left unrecorded, might be lost to future publics.

405 See also: Umpelby, S. Determining the artist's intent in order to be able to conserve modern and contemporary art, *SSCR Journal* 14(1), 2003 pp. 16–17.

The artwork-as-(an)archive model advocates for conceptualising the documentary sources that carry an artwork's identity, including interviews, as stories. Its non-hierarchical (un)structure allows for all the stories to be considered equally, regardless of their origin. Furthermore, since in the model's framework the production and gathering of documentation through research is an integral part of the process of collecting, the artist interview as a research tool becomes an essential part of the acquisition process. Such an understanding might lead museums to implement interviewing on a daily basis, since without the interview the musealium (the artwork-as-an-archive) might be incomplete.

Situating the artist interview on equal footing with other documents gathered in the archive leads us back to the question posed in Chapter 1 (p. 84) and actualised through the expansion of the theoretical model, which addressed the function of the artist interview within the artwork understood as an archive. In her writings on the "artwork meaning archive," Hölling observes that one of the consequences of this concept is the relativisation of the weight of the artist's intentionality (Hölling, 2013, 2015). The archive makes space for securing the presence of other actors involved in the artwork's career – an essential condition for obtaining a comprehensive representation of its nature. Granted that in particular cases these other voices may overshadow the voice of the creator, within the artwork seen as an archive the artist interview as defined in Chapter 1 allows the primary authorship to be secured. The interview also offers institutions the possibility of inviting the artist to take an active part in the formation of the artwork-as-an-archive – to mediate its shape by forming its content and jointly identifying remaining gaps. The concept of artwork as a 'living', dynamic and constantly changing archive supports the standpoint expressed often in the related literature that the artist interview should be seen not as a one-time event, but rather as a series of episodes (Stigter, 2012b). Furthermore, given that the interaction between the documents in the archive needs to be continuously fostered, the artist interview as a research method can function as a means to achieve this goal. Lastly, the interview presents a set of artist's values that can be used as a filter through which the archive can be analysed and studied. As such, the outcome of the artist interview might be seen as a guide for the methodological assessment of information comprised in the archive, and for future uses of the stories gathered there – as an interpretative tool and a 'key' to the artwork understood as an archive (Wielocha, 2017).

5.7 Applying the Archive: Challenges and further implications

As the previous sections argue, one of the major challenges in applying the artwork-as-(an)archive model in a museum is the issue of accessibility and the scope of the institution's willingness to disclose documents. Accessibility depends on institutional policies, legal regulations, existing unspoken rules, social agreements, and, most importantly, on the will, motivation and interest of the museums themselves. However, granting access to institutional documentation and sharing it with others means relinquishing power and giving up some authority over the collected artwork. The artwork-as-(an)archive model is a tool for critical inquiry that makes it possible to confront notions of exclusiveness, closure and property traditionally related to museums. Its application would eventually give rise to questions about what it means to own an artwork whose nature lies in documents that, in the digital era, are not unique but reproducible, easily accessible and can even be cloned and distributed among different institutions. The artwork/archive model enables in-depth exploration of the difference between having and holding, or possessing and safekeeping, and opens up the possibility for institutional collecting to distance itself from the regime of the art market.⁴⁰⁶ However, the crucial question of whether museums are ready or inclined to take on this challenge remains a possible direction for further research.

406 *To Have and to Hold* is the title of an article in which influential curators from two major modern and contemporary art museums – Frances Morris, then Head of Collections at Tate, and Manuel Borja-Villel, director of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía – discuss the way the collection is conceptualised at their institutions. See: Borja-Villel, M., & Morris, F. (2013). *To Have and to Hold*. *The Exhibitionist*, (8), 6–17.