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### Collecting archives of objects and stories

*On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum*

Wielocha, A.B.

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## Chapter 6

# Conclusions: Turning artworks into archives

### Summary of Problems

In contemporary art the boundary between artworks and documents is growing increasingly blurry, as these two categories merge from both directions. On the one hand, as Van Abbemuseum curator Christiane Berndes points out, a great deal of performance documentation that has entered museums in various ways, whether as photographs or videotape, over time has taken on the status of ‘the work’ itself (Westerman & Giannachi, 2018). On the other hand, the physical objects acquired by museums often deteriorate or cease to function, leaving behind documentation that can substitute or represent the work.

This dissertation argues that to secure the continuation of contemporary artworks, museums need to address this ambiguity of categories and revise the corresponding practices by considering documentation as an ‘object of conservation’ that is equally important as the art objects collected. The documentation of a contemporary artwork carries a large part of its identity, and acts as evidence of its potential changeability. As such, it needs to be dynamic and, in Susan Briet’s (2006) terms, ‘inter-documentary’. This implies contextual reliance and, in consequence, the formation of a network of documents that interact with each other. However, a stimulus is needed in order to nourish the set and boost the degree of networking, which can be achieved by means of research. The perpetuation of contemporary artworks therefore requires research to be included in the scope of conservation-related activities, and conservation within the museum to be reconceptualised as a transdisciplinary, trans-departmental, common obligation of those who contribute to documentation.

As for documentation, two recurring issues in the field of contemporary art conservation are how to involve other stakeholders in conservation, and how to apply research as a method (Hummelen & Sillé, 2005; Laurenson, 2006; Scholte & Wharton, 2011; Wharton, 2009). However, there are various impediments that hinder the implementation of these ideas in museum practice, two of which have been identified in this dissertation. The first is the object-oriented character of art institutions, which persist in following classification principles and practices that contradict the characteristics of contemporary art. The second site of tension is the complicated relationship between artists and museums, shaped by multifarious historical and cultural factors and by the parties' often divergent interests. The way these two factors impede the implementation and effective use of novel contemporary-art conservation approaches has been scrutinized here by examining how the artist interview, a research method and a central knowledge-production tool in contemporary art documentation practices, is employed in museum practice.

Unlike other memory institutions like libraries and archives, museums were from the outset designed as collectors of objects. Whereas over the last century the concept of heritage has undergone important changes to include intangible forms of expression, the organisation and practices of museums, especially those collecting art, have remained by and large object-based. Even though, as this research has demonstrated, the identity of contemporary artworks is distributed between objects and documents, museums do not consider these two categories as equally important. While the art objects enter the collection – the museum's core – the documents are deposited in the archive, which traditionally fulfils a mere auxiliary function. The practices related to collecting and collection care are prioritised accordingly. Upon acquisition, art objects need to be crated, insured, shipped, registered, catalogued, checked, and stored in appropriate conditions. In comparison, the effort and resources allocated in the production and care of documentation are usually significantly smaller. Insufficient time and lack of funds were indicated by various participants in this study as one of the main reasons for museums' limited use of artist interviews.

Whereas the history of the relationship between living artists and the museums collecting their work is not directly addressed in this book, the entangled character of this bond is clearly visible between its lines. Although it remains in the background of the research, its influence on the practices employed by the museums studied is clearly observable. The artist interview, as a method established to document the artwork's career and the artist's opinions on the way the future of her or his work might unfold, presumes that artists will be interested in collaborating with institutions towards securing their work's continuity. However, this is not always the case. Often, the interests and visions of the artists and museums clash, and the collecting procedures applied by today's institutions tend to leave little space for mediation. The artist interview, defined in this dissertation in line with oral history theory, is a time-consuming undertaking whose outcome is contingent on wide-ranging circumstances, such as the thoroughness of the preliminary research or the development of rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Moreover, the source produced frequently does not provide straightforward answers to conservation-related queries, but instead requires interpretation and additional research. Finally, if the interview results in sanctions that limit an artwork's use or hinder its continuation, the predominant authority of artists over their work limits the possibilities for negotiation.

In instances in which consulting with the artist in the allocated time frame is unfeasible, researchers can opt to shift their focus towards other sources of artists' statements, remarks and stories, both primary and secondary, related to the collected artwork. This research has shown that although the artist interview has multiple advantages both as an investigative method and as an outcome, other documents might be equally important for understanding an artwork's complexity and in consequence for steering its possible futures. However, many of these documents, such as letters or emails exchanged between artists and curators, correspondence with the producer of an exhibition featuring the artwork, or recordings of public artist talks and interviews, are not considered by museums as relevant for conservation, and are stored in unstable, semi-private archives, if they are kept at all. This observation leads back to the object-oriented organisation of museums, which entails dividing museum staff and practices between those who are involved in the conservation of the artworks collected, and those who are not.

Consequently, as this dissertation suggests, practical and theoretical developments from the field of contemporary art conservation have yet to be fully implemented by museums, and safeguarding contemporary artworks continues to pose a challenge for their institutional keepers. The causes of this situation are, among others, museums' object-based organisation, and their adherence to a notion of conservation that does not match up with the actual needs of contemporary works of art. This manifests itself in the obsolete categories of artworks and artwork-related documents and, in turn, in the division between collection and archive.

### Towards a Solution

Drawing on critiques of the museum which assert that decontextualisation is inherent to musealisation, this dissertation argues that upon crossing the threshold of a museum the contemporary artwork transforms into documents that represent it. Because this transformation is de facto and automatic, my proposal is ultimately not to treat art as documents, but to recognise that this conversion already takes place, and to adjust institutional practices accordingly. Applying Briet's perspective on the nature of documents, art objects, too, can be seen as documents that are equally important as other documents in the set. Therefore, the musealised contemporary artwork is a set of documents of the same provenance, and as such resembles an archive.

The concept of artworks as archives was introduced in the field of contemporary art conservation by conservation theory scholar Hanna Hölling (2013a, 2015, 2018). While Hölling states that each media artwork is an archive, I propose to reconceptualise all musealised contemporary artworks as archives, and to include these archives in museum collections. This entails the conceptual transformation of institutional collections of objects into collections of archives. This dissertation takes Hölling's concept as a starting point and expands it by elaborating on the internal organisation of the archive and the possibilities of implementing it in today's museums.

The structure of the artwork seen as an archive follows the logic of Briet's 'dynamism of living documentation', which consists of networks of documents that create knowledge by interacting with each other through juxtaposition, overlapping and

complementing. Its organisation is rhizomatic – open-ended, decentralized and with non-hierarchical, multiple entry and exit points. To emphasise the lack of fixed classification and categorisation within the archive, I have adopted the notion of ‘anarchives’ as introduced by media theorist Siegfried Zielinski. The unstructured nature of ‘anarchives’ respects the specificity of the documents’ original order or lack thereof, as well as the intrinsic incompleteness, partiality and fragmentation of the archive. Instead of promoting ‘the one and only story’, ‘anarchives’ contain numerous micro-narratives. The model of artwork-as-(an)archive benefits from the capacities of digital technologies such as databases. The model is founded on the principle of accumulation and, in particular, on the perspective of media art theorist Richard Rinehart, who has argued that collecting as many records as possible increases the accuracy of an artwork’s representation (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014).

The artwork-as-(an)archive model is supported in this dissertation by examples of practices tested in today’s museums that to a certain extent resemble the model, share similar theoretical underpinnings, or suggest ways in which it could be implemented. The examples provided indicate that there are significant conditions which need to be fulfilled in order to use the artwork-as-(an)archive model in institutions, including not only infrastructure but also the institution’s willingness to provide access to documentation. The cases discussed have brought to light further advantages of the artwork-as-(an)archive model, such as its potential capacity to increase the public understanding of and involvement in institutional collecting and contemporary art in general.

I propose that the implementation of the artwork-as-(an)archive model as a principle for institutional contemporary-art collecting could make it possible overcome the two factors that have been identified as keeping novel approaches developed in the field of contemporary art conservation from taking root in museums, and thus facilitate the institutional care of contemporary artworks. The artwork-as-(an)archive model confronts the object-oriented character of art institutions’ classification and care practices in three different ways. Firstly, it supports the expansion of the acquisition process to include, besides the purchase of art objects, the production and gathering of documentation. In other words, an acquisition would be considered incomplete unless it assembles artwork-related documentation. Secondly, it fosters the inclusion of

documentation within the scope of collection care, and accordingly calls for research into the nature of an artwork to be understood as conservation-related activity. Thirdly, it shifts the concept of conservation within the museum from a set of object-oriented actions to a collaborative effort of the whole institution, and a common obligation shared by all those who contribute to the archive.

In this dissertation the artwork seen as an archive is thought of as a space for collaboration between artists and museums, a space to be collectively shaped, filled and nourished. This collaboration, whether successful, failed, thorny or non-existent, will leave its trace in the archive, securing the presence of the artwork's creator and, consequently, its original authorship. Within the artwork-as-(an)archive model all documents are accorded equal value, be they records of artists' statements, conservation reports or production invoices. Referring to these records as 'stories' instead of 'documents', as this dissertation proposes, emphasises their subjective nature and the need for interpretation. Equalising the archive's multiplicity of stories, and underlining subjectivity as their inherent feature, enhances a critical distance with respect to the artist's views and wishes, and offers a foundation for mediating and even for questioning the artist's opinion, if necessary.

Within the artwork-as-(an)archive model the artist interview can take on a variety of functions. Firstly, the interview is a method for collaboration within the space of the archive, and thus for negotiating the shape and scope of the latter. Secondly, as a research method, it enhances the mutual interaction among the archive's records. Thirdly, because the artwork-as-(an)archive model encourages practitioners to reconceptualise how interviewing can be used to gather stories on artworks' conceptual dimension, it eventually transforms the artist interview from an auxiliary method into a conservation tool in its own right. Finally, the artist interview as a source might serve as a key to the archive – an interpretative tool or filter through which the archive can be read.

## Original Contribution

The novelty of my approach within the field of contemporary art conservation is that it is built around a definition of contemporary art, and therefore specifies its actual subject of inquiry. While most of the doctoral dissertations related to contemporary art conservation conducted during the last decade have focused on a certain artistic format, medium or genre – software-based art (Ensom, 2019), digital art (García Morales, 2010), net art (Dekker, 2014), time-based or media art (Hölling, 2013), installation art (Jadzinska, 2010; van Saaze, 2009a), performance art (Marçal, 2018), photography (Marchesi, 2017); conceptual art (Stigter, 2016); temporary art (Kromholz, 2016) – this one aims to depart from this classification in order to provide a more general view on the subject.<sup>407</sup> This approach is grounded in the conviction that overcoming these divisions, both within the field of contemporary art conservation as well as within collecting institutions, might benefit the further development of methods for safeguarding contemporary artworks. This dissertation contributes to the field of contemporary art conservation by further exploring the interrelation between oral history theory and the artist interview, analysing the role of the artist interview within the institutional framework and providing a critical perspective on its actual use. Furthermore, by emphasising their common goals, it establishes a link between new approaches to museum-based contemporary art conservation and the curatorial drive to reinvent art institutions.

My main contribution, however, is the artwork-as-(an) archive model – a transdisciplinary, theoretical framework for holistic, institutional care of contemporary artworks that supports the adaptation of the traditional organisation of art museums to the specific needs of contemporary art. Besides facilitating conservation, the artwork-as-(an) archive model fosters transparency, collaboration and inclusion, and in consequence the democratisation of contemporary art and its institutions.

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407 There are other recent doctoral dissertations that offer a more general approach to the conservation of contemporary art, beyond tackling a specific 'kind of art', e.g.: Gordon, 2011; Macedo, 2008; Fiske, 2004.

## Where to Next? Implications of the study and recommendations for further research

This project opens up a number of aspects that could be pursued in further research by triggering a variety of questions, such as what it means to conserve an artwork understood as an archive, and how this shift in condition might affect the role of the conservator. As Hölling has observed (2013), in this context the notion of conservation extends to the management, interpretation and upkeep of the archive. In other words, the continuous modification of the archive might be seen as a method for conserving potentially changeable contemporary artworks. However, viewing the artwork as a transparent, accessible and collaborative archive could stand at odds with the authority not only of the institution, but also the conservator. In the framework of the artwork-as-(an)archive model, the latter ceases to be a lonely guardian of the artwork's integrity, but one actor among many in what expert media art scholar Annet Dekker has termed (in the context of net-art preservation) as "networks of care", which consist of providers of knowledge from a variety of fields and backgrounds (Dekker, 2018). The role of the conservator within these networks may vary from leader to moderator or mediator, which is an issue left to be explored by future researchers.<sup>408</sup>

The reconceptualisation of the artwork as an archive converts it into a collaborative space for various stakeholders from both inside and outside the museum. Besides bridging internal institutional divisions, the artwork-as-(an)archive model might also be employed as a method for fostering external partnerships, for example through the application of the post-custodial archival paradigm. Another way to use the artwork-as-(an)archive model in an outward direction is by opening it up to the public, by not only making it accessible in 'viewer mode' but also inviting the public to actively collaborate. The artwork-as-(an)archive model may be seen as a way to democratise

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408 The idea of the conservator as a mediator has long been discussed in the field of conservation: as mediator between the artist and art history (Stigter, 2004), mediator of artist intention (van Saaze, 2009a), or mediator between the artwork's stakeholders (Wielocha, 2018). For more about the role of conservators as advocates, mediators and/or sources of expertise, see: Avrami, Mason, & de la Torre, 2000. This section speaks about the potential role of the conservator as a mediator within the 'networks of care' – that is between different participants in the artwork's care, which could be institutions, private citizens, communities, etc.

artworks in public collections – a space where the audience can contribute to the artwork and take an active part in shaping its future. As such, it might enable new ways of understanding, appreciating and using museum collections. Furthermore, it might also offer the possibility of experimenting with participative conservation.<sup>409</sup> As Rinehart and Ippolito (2014) have noted, the involvement of amateur ‘unreliable archivists’, although not easy to accept for conservation professionals, is necessary for certain kinds of contemporary art production, for instance software-based art. This path was also signposted by Glenn Wharton who, in the context of media-art, envisioned the concept of crowd documentation or even crowd conservation (Wharton, 2015b). Further exploration of the use of the artwork-as-(an)archive model as a tool for enhancing collaborative conservation is another interesting path to pursue.

The unique features of digital archiving raise the temptation, reflected in the construction of the artwork-as-(an)archive model, to collect and archive everything, just in case. However, as computer scientist Serge Abiteboul (2018) has remarked, by attempting to collect and archive everything, one could fall into the trap of Funes the Memorious, from the eponymous story by Jorge Luis Borges, who remembers everything but understands nothing. “The act of abstracting is a form of forgetting – we must forget some details to gain insight into the broader world around us. And herein lies the existential problem of digital memory – the choice of what to forget” (Abiteboul, 2018, p. 226). This observation points to another problem that calls for additional research – what are the advantages and drawbacks of accumulation as a method for preservation?

Lastly, the artwork-as-(an)archive model, although elaborated theoretically, needs to be investigated further and examined against museums’ day-to-day reality. As this dissertation has indicated, there are several museums that are already experimenting

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409 Challenges related to recording and documenting the public reception of contemporary artworks have recently been explored by many scholars and practitioners, especially in the context of performance art and interactive media artworks, see e.g.: Kwastek, 2018; Muller, 2008. At present, there is a clear tendency to promote participatory decision-making processes in conservation, especially in the context of ethnographic objects, public art and installations. Essential for studying this issue is the work of Miriam Clavir (2002) and Glenn Wharton (2008).

with some of the issues that this model supports, such as merging the collection and the archive. Perhaps some of these institutions would be interested in advancing these experimentations by embracing conservation-related challenges.

### Limitations of the Research, Critical Stance and Final Remarks

Although the case-based approach and the use of ethnographic methods proved to be suitable for studying institutions and institutional conservation, their application and therefore the results of this study have important limitations that need to be acknowledged. This dissertation does not provide a complete picture of the condition of contemporary artworks in institutional collections, nor does it reflect the whole spectrum of how artist interviews are used in this context. The number of museums studied is highly restricted, and all of them are located in Europe and the US. The artworks investigated were created by artists working in the Global North.<sup>410</sup> Furthermore, the lack of standardisation of museums' structures and procedures, together with the inevitable diversity of the artworks studied, render certain comparisons and conclusions debatable. Finally, the field of contemporary art conservation as well as related institutional practices are currently in transition (van Saaze, 2009c), and therefore are constantly developing at a rapid pace. This research spanned over three years and, although from the perspective of theoretical advances this does not seem like a long time, during this short period practice has already evolved significantly. These limitations, however, open the opportunity to scale and expand this research to further investigations.

By way of conclusion, I would emphasise that our future understanding of contemporary artworks can only be constructed through traces of documentation. Documentation constitutes an artwork's potential to be reborn; in other words, the future fate of a contemporary artwork is to be enacted out of the documentation surrounding it. This book offers a model which grants artwork-related documentation a status equal to that of art objects, and obliges institutions to care for it on a similar basis. Furthermore, the artwork as an archive, a 'repository of subjectivities', provides a space for the animated

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410 With the exception of Danh Vo, born in Vietnam, but raised and educated in Denmark. For a discussion of whether Vo can be considered a Vietnamese artist see: Taylor, 2012.

documentation to produce future knowledge about today's art, and invites artists and potentially also the public to participate in actively shaping it.<sup>411</sup> As a treasury of ideas, it provides a foundation for their new uses.

Today's contemporary art museums, often accused of being too traditional to embrace contemporary art practices, while at the same time criticised as overly elitist and catering only to a highly educated and therefore privileged public, will need to reinvent themselves on many different levels – a process that some institutions have already embarked upon. In my view, by encouraging a critical self-reflection on the museum's modes of working, protocols, and hierarchies, considering the artwork as an archive may lend support to this overarching process. Although the model offered in this dissertation was conceived as a way to respond to the conservation-related needs of contemporary art, it might also inspire progressive thinking about its dissemination. Artwork as an archive is thought of as a tool for both internal and external collaboration: across institutional departments, with artists, and with publics, and as such it fosters the opening-up and democratisation of institutions by sharing with their users basic responsibilities such as conservation. Given the structure, organisation and legal circumstances of today's museums, the artwork-as-(an)archive model may appear to be a radical, utopian construct that is difficult if not impossible to apply. However, even if it cannot be implemented from one day to the next, it can be incorporated into the museum's fabric gradually, along the lines of the Van Abbemuseum's examination of their institutional practices: with a two steps forward, one step back approach, carefully and creatively testing each of its impacts before fully integrating it into the museum's policies.<sup>412</sup> From the specific vantage of conservation, this dissertation has attempted to help get institutions to start taking bold (albeit faltering) steps along this path.

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411 The term 'repository of subjectivities' was borrowed from Sara Diamond who uses it in relation to museums in Ascott, Diamond, Lovink, & van Mourik Broekman, 2000.

412 Christiane Berndes, Curator and Head of Collections at the Van Abbemuseum, describes institutional experiments related to merging the collection and archive as an approach akin to artistic practice where, instead of solving problems, questions are addressed in multiple ways by putting together exhibitions. Berndes explains that the Van Abbemuseum was often too hasty in applying concepts that often proved incomprehensible to the public: "We realise we are taking steps too quickly and the response of our visitors was, 'Yes, but we want to also have the chance to really experience the artwork'. Then we applied two steps forward one steps back approach, and instead of putting the documents next to the artworks we would put them in vitrines" (C. Berndes, in-person interview, November 21, 2018).