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On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum

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Summary

Collecting Archives of Objects and Stories:

On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum

Conventionally, twentieth and twentieth-first century art challenge traditional principles of conservation. In the 1980s modern and contemporary art conservation emerged as specific field to tackle the modern materials and new technologies embraced by 20th-century artists. Although technical materials-oriented research is still an important part of the field, since the beginning of the 21st century the focus has shifted towards the works' immaterial features. Conventionally, visual artworks have been perceived as fixed, unique, material entities created and finished at a particular time, and traditional conservation theories were established accordingly. Nevertheless, art produced during the last decades, especially contemporary art, has often resisted these tenets, undermining conservation dogmas such as material authenticity, artist intent, reversibility, minimal intervention, and the conviction that an object's integrity resides in its physical features. This discrepancy and its practical impacts have pushed scholars and practitioners to seek out concepts and tools supporting an effective approach to this 'new' art, resulting in a new theoretical frameworks, models, tools and approaches. However, part of the problem in implementing such novel solutions within the museum is that, in a sense, contemporary art poses a challenge to one of the principal duties of the institution: to preserve.

This doctoral dissertation focuses on this gap between the fast-developing theory of contemporary art conservation and the rigidity of institutional practice. Its vantage point is the triangle of mutual relationships between artist, a museum, and a contemporary artwork as collectible, investigating how contemporary artworks are collected, documented and conserved in today's institutions. Through research on collaborations between contemporary art institutions and artists, with a special focus on the artist interview, it looks at how (and if) new methods developed in the field of contemporary art conservation are incorporated by museums, and attempts to identify factors undermining their effectiveness. The study aims to offer a solution that respects

the central position of the collection for the museum, while also posing more profound questions about the nature of contemporary artworks in relation to traditional museum structures. By tracing the discrepancies between these two notions, it works toward a theoretical model that might help to bridge them.

Chapter 1, “Contemporary Art, the Artist Interview, Documentation and Conservation: Establishment of terms and survey of practices”, defines four key concepts – contemporary art, artist interview, documentation, conservation – whose definitions are grounded in the literature of art history and theory, curatorial studies, conservation, oral history and archival studies. Two of these terms – the artist interview and documentation – are put forth as ‘model’ concepts, raising questions concerning the relationship between them. While in the non-hierarchical model of artwork-related documentation all elements hold equal status, they may still have different functions. Moreover, if the artist’s relationship to the artwork is a privileged one, and how might this be reflected in the content/organization of the documentation? These discussions lead to the study’s central research question: What is the function of the artist interview within the body of artwork-related documentation in an institutional collection?

The core of the study is formed by three case-study chapters that compile data from fieldwork, literature review and archival research (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). Their order mirrors the course of the two-phase investigation. Data collected during Phase I is described and analysed in Chapter 2, “Setting the scene: Meanings, Sanctions and Properties. Mirosław Bałka and the many institutional approaches to conserving his work”. It provides a basis for reflecting on institutional collaboration with artists on their collected works, extracts key concepts and defines problems. This part of the research follows ‘theoretical sampling’ – initial data collection without fixed a priori theoretical assumptions. Thus, the study begins by exploring ‘familiar’ or ‘established’ cases that confirm and support – but also question, contradict or reject – preliminary theoretical ideas. Three notions broadly discussed in theoretical conservation scholarship have been selected as starting points: the ‘artwork’s meaning’, ‘artist’s sanctions’ and ‘significant properties’. These are tested against three artworks by Mirosław Bałka hosted by three different collections. In the process, two main sites of tension facing contemporary art museums are identified. Firstly, tensions arising through institutions’ classification systems, which distribute works of art between different realms of the museum, and secondly, those stemming from the relationship

between artists and institutions. This observation leads to the establishment of three focal points to guide further empirical investigation into museums (Phase II): artwork-related documentation, the internal organisation of a museum and its collection-care practices, and collaboration with artists on presenting and preserving their musealised artworks.

The outcome of Phase II is presented in Chapters 3 and 4, which describe and analyse case studies carried out at various museums in Europe and the US. Both chapters scrutinise the condition of contemporary artworks as collectibles, analyse institutional museum–artist collaboration practices oriented towards presenting and preserving, and look at how this collaboration is recorded in artwork-related documentation. Chapter 3, “Danh Vo’s ‘Chandeliers Project’: ‘For any future exhibition of the piece, please contact the artist’”, scrutinises museums as collectors of objects, and considers how their traditional, object-driven classificatory principles influence how they care for contemporary art. Auxiliary notions such as ‘art project’ and ‘artwork constituency’ help to understand how contemporary artworks are musealised, and make evident how inherent features of the ‘new kind of art’, combined with current museum procedures, have turned musealisation into a potential threat to the artwork’s integrity. The case study considers an art project by Danh Vo that resulted in three artefacts, each collected by a large institution. What we find is that in the museum, the identity of the contemporary artwork, distributed between physical objects and the stories which contextualise them, becomes divided between two institutional realms – the collection and the archive – which are governed by different rules and procedures. The case demonstrates that, whereas institutions invest in care for the objects in their collection, the documentation that may carry the bulk of an artwork’s identity often receives less attention and resources.

The above observations are confirmed in Chapter 4, “Barbara Kruger’s Wall-Wraps: The distributed artwork in the light of the artist interview”, which analyses in detail the distribution of a particular contemporary artwork between various domains of the museum, and the consequences this has had for the artwork’s perpetuation. The piece in question lacks a stable material representation, and exists in the museum as a set of digital files. By reflecting on the foundations of the museum as a concept, this chapter proposes that upon musealisation the artwork transforms into stories recorded in documents that represent it. In the digital era, where these stories are stored as records

in databases, the quality of this representation follows the logic of accumulation – more stories that interact with each other allow for a more accurate picture of the artwork. This interaction, however, must be fostered via research. The investigation brings into focus complex interpersonal relationships that govern the institutional collecting of contemporary art and influence the collaboration between artists and institutions. Through critical analysis of an interview conducted with the artist, scrutinised both as a method and as a source, this chapter shows how these relationships might impact the implementation of novel methods for the institutional care of contemporary artworks.

Chapter 5, “Artworks, Archives and Interviews: Reinventing institutional practices”, summarises the findings of the empirical part of the study and confirms the hypothesis that the problem with implementing novel contemporary art conservation methods in art museums is linked to the object-based principles governing museum organisation and collection-care practices, in addition to the complex relationship between artists and art institutions. Employing and extending concepts introduced by conservation theorist Hanna Hölling, and building on the notions of ‘artwork-related documentation’ and anarchives as introduced in Chapter 1, this chapter proposes a solution aimed at helping to adapt the existing museum structure to the needs of contemporary art. It features a model of the ‘artwork-as-an-(an)archive’, based on the evidence that the museum’s traditional division between objects and documents, and in consequence collections and archives, is rendered obsolete by contemporary art. Possible ways of implementing the model are presented through examples from museums that have come up with innovative documentation strategies in line with the model’s specifications. Furthermore, issues with the accessibility of artwork-related documents and the willingness to share them – one requirement for successful implementation of the model – are discussed in relation to the examples from the empirical portion of the study. The final section addresses the artist interview and its possible functions within the proposed model. Understanding contemporary artworks as archives transforms the artist interview into a source, method and tool. Viewed as a source, it is a significant part of any artwork being collected. As a collaborative method, it helps negotiation the shape and content of the artwork understood as an archive. Finally, as a full-fledged research tool for both collecting and conserving, it fosters interaction among the archive’s records, and can be used as a ‘key’ to the archive – an interpretative tool used to analyse and unravel it.

Samenvatting

Een archief van objecten en verhalen:
De toekomst van hedendaagse kunst in een museum

Twintigste- en eenentwintigste-eeuwse kunst vormt een uitdaging voor de traditionele beginselen van conservering en restauratie. In de jaren '80 ontwikkelde de restauratie van moderne en hedendaagse kunst zich tot een aparte specialisatie om met de moderne materialen en nieuwe technologieën die door 20e -eeuwse kunstenaars werden gebruikt om te kunnen gaan. Hoewel technisch materiaalgericht onderzoek nog steeds een belangrijk onderdeel is van het vakgebied, is sinds het begin van de 21e eeuw het accent verschoven naar de immateriële eigenschappen van het werk. Beeldende kunstwerken worden gewoonlijk gezien als bestendige, unieke, materiële entiteiten die op een bepaald ogenblik werden gecreëerd en voltooid, en traditionele restauratietheorieën waren op deze invalshoek gebaseerd. De kunst die in de laatste decennia werd geproduceerd, in het bijzonder de hedendaagse kunst, heeft zich echter dikwijls verzet tegen deze beginselen. Dogma's van de restauratie zoals materiële authenticiteit, intentie van de kunstenaar, reversibiliteit, minimale interventie en de overtuiging dat de integriteit van een object besloten ligt in zijn fysieke eigenschappen werden ondermijnd. Deze discrepantie, en de praktische gevolgen ervan, hebben wetenschappers en restauratoren ertoe gebracht concepten en gereedschap te zoeken die een effectieve omgang met deze 'nieuwe' kunst faciliteren, waardoor nieuwe theoretische kaders, modellen, 'tools' en benaderingen ontstonden. Het toepassen hiervan is echter lastig. Het probleem is namelijk dat hedendaagse kunst een van de hoofdtaken van musea ter discussie stelt: het behouden.

Dit proefschrift focust op deze kloof tussen de zich snel ontwikkelende theorie van de conservering en restauratie van hedendaagse kunst en de starheid van de institutionele praktijk. De invalshoek van het onderzoek is de driehoek gevormd door de wederzijdse relaties tussen de kunstenaar, het museum, en het hedendaagse kunstwerk als verzamelobject, en het onderzoekt hoe hedendaagse kunstwerken

worden verzameld, gedocumenteerd en geconserveerd in contemporaine instellingen. Door het samenwerken tussen kunstinstellingen en kunstenaars te onderzoeken, met een speciaal accent op het kunstenaarsinterview, kijkt het proefschrift naar hoe, en of, nieuwe methodes die in het veld van de conservering en restauratie van hedendaagse kunst zijn ontwikkeld worden overgenomen door musea, en probeert de factoren te identificeren die de effectiviteit ervan ondermijnen. Het onderzoek poogt een oplossing te vinden welke respecteert dat collecties in musea een centrale plaats innemen, en tegelijk diepgaande vragen te stellen over het wezen van hedendaagse kunstwerken in relatie tot traditionele museumsstructuren. Door de discrepanties tussen deze twee opvattingen in kaart te brengen, werkt dit onderzoek toe naar een theoretisch model dat de verschillen kan overbruggen.

In hoofdstuk 1, "Contemporary Art, the Artist Interview, Documentation and Conservation: Establishment of terms and survey of practices", worden vier sleutelbegrippen gedefinieerd – hedendaagse kunst, kunstenaarsinterview, documentatie, conservering. Deze definities zijn gebaseerd op literatuur uit de kunstgeschiedenis en -theorie, curatorial studies, conservering, oral history en de archivalie. Twee van deze begrippen – het kunstenaarsinterview en de documentatie – worden voorgesteld als 'model'-concepten, hetgeen vragen oproept over de relatie tussen deze begrippen. Hoewel in het niet-hiërarchische model van de kunstwerkgerelateerde documentatie alle elementen een gelijke status hebben, kunnen ze niettemin verschillende functies hebben. Als bovendien de relatie die de kunstenaar met het kunstwerk heeft een geprivilegieerde positie inneemt, hoe wordt dit dan in de inhoud/structuur van de documentatie weerspiegeld? Deze overwegingen bereiden de weg voor de centrale onderzoeksvraag: wat is de functie van het kunstenaarsinterview in bestaande kunstwerkgerelateerde documentatie in institutionele collecties?

De kern van het onderzoek bestaat uit drie casestudy's die gegevens halen uit veldonderzoek, literatuuronderzoek en archiefonderzoek (hoofdstukken 2, 3 en 4). De volgorde weerspiegelt het verloop van het tweesporige onderzoek. Gegevens die in fase I zijn verzameld worden beschreven en geanalyseerd in hoofdstuk 2, "Setting the scene: Meanings, Sanctions and Properties. Mirosław Balka and the many institutional approaches to conserving his work". Dit hoofdstuk legt de basis

voor een reflectie over institutionele samenwerking met kunstenaars wanneer hun werken deel uitmaken van de collectie; er volgen kernconcepten die een verdere definitie krijgen. Dit deel van het onderzoek is gebaseerd op 'theoretical sampling' – er worden eerst gegevens verzameld zonder theoretische vooronderstellingen. Het onderzoek begint daarom met het bestuderen van 'vertrouwde' of 'gevestigde' cases, die eerdere theoretische ideeën ondersteunen en bevestigen – deze deels echter ook ter discussie stellen, ermee in tegenspraak zijn, of verwerpen. Drie begrippen die breed uitgemeten zijn in wetenschappelijke publicaties over restauratietheorie werden als uitgangspunt genomen: de 'betekenis van het kunstwerk', 'artist's sanction' (het 'fiat van de kunstenaar') en de 'kenmerkende eigenschappen'. Deze worden aan de hand van drie kunstwerken van Mirosław Balka uit drie verschillende collecties getoetst. Hieruit worden de twee voornaamste spanningsgebieden voor musea voor hedendaagse kunst afgeleid. Ten eerste, spanningen die ontstaan door de classificatiesystemen van instellingen die kunstwerken aan verschillende domeinen van het museum toewijzen. Ten tweede, spanningen die voortkomen uit de relaties tussen kunstenaars en instellingen. Deze observatie leidt tot het vastleggen van drie focuspunten die verder empirisch onderzoek in musea sturen (fase II): kunstwerkgerelateerde documentatie, de interne structuur van een museum en hoe collectiebeheer wordt uitgevoerd, en de samenwerking met kunstenaars betreffende de presentatie en het behoud van hun gemusealiseerde werken.