Interview with Sanneke Stigter

"Conservation is about the way the artwork can be perceived and not only about how it is presented."

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The Dawn of the Post-Contemporary Art Age

The Art of Trespass: On Morgan Thorson and John Fleischer

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Sanneke Stigter On How to Preserve Conceptual Art

The Psychogeography of Val Britton

Interview: Anton Ginzburg

Jesse Jones’ Parasitic Interventions

Revisiting Picasso’s Guernica

Ed Clark: A Life in the Arts, with a Broom

‘It’s Not About Having the Last Word’

The Role of Art Criticism
22. KETTLE’S WHISTLE
   The Dawn of the Post-Contemporary Art Age / By Michele Robecchi

24. PUSH TO FLUSH
   Things You Probably Don’t Know about Picasso’s Guernica / By Paco Barragán

FEATURES

26. It’s Not About Having the Last Word / By David Pagel

32. The Art of Trespass: Still Life and Tuning Device / By Christina Schmid

36. In conversation with Carl Ostendarp / By Craig Drennen

42. Ed Clark: Locomotion. A Life in the Arts, with a Broom / By Jeff Edwards


54. The Psychogeography of Val Britton / By Scott Thorp

62. Parasitic Interventions. An Interview with Jesse Jones / By EL Putnam

68. DIALOGUES FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM
   Interview with Sanneke Stigter / By Paco Barragán

72. ART CRITICS’ READING LIST
   Alexia Tala
   Leonie Bradbury

74. REVIEWS
“Conservation is about the way the artwork can be perceived and not only about how it is presented.”

Dutch Sanneke Stigter holds a Ph.D. in the humanities from the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Between 2004 and 2011 she was head of conservation of contemporary art and modern sculpture at the Kröller-Müller Museum. The title of her recent dissertation at UvA is “Between Concept and Material. Working with Conceptual Art: A Conservator’s Testimony.” The conservation of conceptual art is a true challenge for institutions. Consequently, we looked behind the scenes and discussed the methodology, integrity of the artwork and especially the “conservation ethics” that should prevail before intervening in the original artwork.

BY PACO BARRAGÁN

Paco Barragán - You just completed your Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) with the title “Between Concept and Material. Working with Conceptual Art: A Conservator’s Testimony.” How did the idea for the doctoral thesis come about?

Sanneke Stigter - I guess the short answer is: fascination. But it has a long history, as it developed from my lifelong interest in photography-based work. As an art historian and later a trained art conservator, it was only natural that my attention was directed towards artists using photography in their work. The interesting thing with conceptual art is that in terms of conservation, it forces you to think critically about the profession of conservation itself. Why keeping the original photograph? What is the importance of the material aspects in conceptual artworks? That is what it makes so fascinating to study conceptual art through the lens of conservation. It is actually a study on conservation. The main research question—how to conserve a concept—directs the attention to both ends of the spectrum.

P.B. - You just mentioned photography. From my own experience as a curator, I have seen how in just 10 to 15 years many photo works have displayed severe imperfections, including works by famous artists like Cindy Sherman. What has happened with photography from your point of view in terms of conservation, in which not only the concept but also the presentation is important?

S.S. - Early color photographs can indeed be characterized by severe shifts in color, a feature that may even distinguish them as vintage prints. Hence, different approaches in the presentation of conceptual artworks can be found. One is that originally provided materials are kept as part of the artwork, even by mistake when it turns out that the concept required it to be changed according to the location, as seen with Joseph Kosuth’s “Proto-Investigations,” such as Glass (one and three). On the other hand, when photographic material is replaced, regardless of whether this was intended or not, often the photograph’s initial appearance turns out to be neglected, even when it contributed to the work’s content. For instance, a silkscreen structure, fiber-based paper and a slightly undulated surface as a result from mounting by hand has completely different connotations than the impersonal, super-smooth surface of machine-mounted and ‘plexified’ prints. Yet, it happens that such variations are found in the lives of single artworks, as well as in various manifestations of Kosuth’s “Proto-Investigations.”

P.B. - Kosuth’s “Proto-Investigations” are a good example of the challenges conservation faces as his actions and instructions have changed over time and Kosuth himself proved not to be very consistent. How far can that be attributed to the art market and the need of adapting an artwork to a more standard procedure?

S.S. - What I observed is that the “Proto-Investigations” that have been sold at a later date appear differently than ones that have been part of collections for a much longer time. This is only natural when you consider that this kind of work is generally not kept in stock. They are made when needed for display and when they are sold. This means that the ones that are sold more recently are made with materials that are contemporary to that time, reflecting developments in the photographic industry. It becomes interesting when the newer form of presentation, with Sintra-mounted inkjet prints, is also applied for the earlier acquired “Proto-Investigations” that were initially made manifest with gelatin silver prints on fiber-based paper that were push-pinned to the wall. However, considering ‘old’ and ‘new’ versions immediately emphasizes the ambiguous relation to the concept of the artwork, whereas it does illustrate how theoretical work is displayed in practice, determining the way the audience perceives the work.

CONCEPTUAL ART’S PARADOXES

P.B. - The idea of preservation related to conceptual art sounds like a contradictio in terminis, and as such there is hardly bibliography on the topic.

S.S. - True. But there is a lot of literature on conceptual art and about the conservation of contemporary art. The number of scholars interested in this field is growing. Also, there are a lot of other sources to turn to. The paradox of conceptual art is, of course, that these works became collected and entered the museum. Hence, there are archives with lots of information, photographic documentation, correspondence, notes, etc. Many conceptual artworks are available in storage, sometimes in parts and sometimes in instructions. Most importantly, often the artists themselves are still available, or people who worked with them, which makes oral history particularly relevant as well as participatory research. When combining all sources, a lot of information becomes available to work with.

P.B. - Can you explain why you specifically chose the lens of conservation?

S.S. - That is my habitus. I am a contemporary art conservator, and I
have noticed that it allows for a research approach that brings special details to light. I have worked in several museums, but especially during my time at the Kröller-Müller Museum, where I headed the conservation department for modern sculpture and contemporary art, I became aware of what a tremendously rich environment this is for research into contemporary art. As the conservator involved, you interpret a work’s history from its various manifestations, which may call certain museum practices into question, including your own role. Thus, your own involvement is put into perspective. This lens allows you to read the many documents with different eyes, as in ‘crime’-scene investigation. The museum is the place where it happens!

P.B. - This could lead us to one of the claims in your dissertation: that the conceptual artwork’s materiality is more meaningful than is generally thought.

S.S. - Material features can reveal art historical details that were previously unknown. They may support the work’s message, even when this was considered a ‘perfunctory affair’ in conceptual art. The growing technical possibilities often inspire artists in their work. For instance, Ger van Elk started using extreme long strips of photographic paper the moment Kodak introduced rolls of 10-meter-long chromogenic paper. In a different manner, Joseph Kosuth chose the Photostat to express the reproducible character of his work. The reverse image of a white typeface on black underlines this aspect as it is characteristic of the Photostat. Kosuth exploited this feature by purposely choosing this appearance, judging from the fact that the Photostat machine had already become obsolete by that time and that Photostat positive paper had entered the market more than a decade prior to that. Hence, he chose the visual language of the Photostat especially for the connotation of reproducibility to underline the idea of his work.

In another case, technical details revealed that a work by Jan Dibbets, The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum, never existed the way it was described in the literature. The six-minute delay in the slide projection would render a real-time experience, whereas this had never been possible in practice. So no matter how conceptual a work of art is, its manifestation always includes information on the work that may contribute to the content or its appearance. It only needs to be observed and interpreted.

P.B. - Yes, but in this particular case of The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum, the reinstall was totally different from the initial version altering the original slides that were projected at life-size. Has this shift from the original presentation imposed a problematic shift in the conceptual meaning of the artwork?

S.S. - They are different manifestations based on the same idea. But you have a point in the sense that this is a perfect example of the significance of the used materials and techniques in conceptual art. The initial version, a site-specific installation, deals more with time and place than the later photo collage. However, I am not sure whether the installation is ‘the original.’ That is why I purposely use the word ‘initial’ to indicate a first manifestation. I like Jan Dibbets’ comment about this case, stating that it is not so important to discuss which one is the better solution, but that it is much more interesting that there are two versions. It demonstrates that not only judging past museum practices is relevant, but that it is especially important to investigate these in relation to what the artwork really is. The Van Abbemuseum dealt with the artwork’s life in an original way. They provided full access for research and even installed the work in experimental set-up to enter a dialogue with the work’s past, leaving its future open at the same time.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF CONSERVATION

P.B. - In terms of your research, what kind of methodology did you use with regard to the conservation of conceptual art in a museum context?

S.S. - When being immersed in your own research environment yourself, the strategy of participant observation automatically turns into critically reflecting on your own contribution, exposing your beliefs in approaching the work. Apart from all other research methods in conservation, from close visual examination and scientific analyses to conducting artist interviews and consolidating paint layers, I turned
to an autoethnographic approach in order to include the reflexivity that is needed to remain critical of your own input. Dealing with the past is one thing, but taking on responsibility for the work’s current state and future appearance yourself is quite another. Therefore, it is extra important to be critical and conscious of your own input in the artwork’s life. The interesting thing is that autoethnography also does something to the reader. It elicits critical awareness with the next conservator involved, or curator depending on who is taking the decisions. Leaving a testimony according to this approach serves the critical stance that is needed in the conservation of complex artworks, as they are shaped by museum practices.

P.B. - Could you elaborate on this autoethnographic approach and provide some examples of how it could be used as a new tool in research?
S.S. - Using this approach provides insight into the way a professional performs within given circumstances and a certain context. The approach illuminates personal experience—even anxiety, engages with the different dilemmas and acknowledges the subjective nature of decision-making. The approach levels with the semblance of objectivity in conservation, supported by the natural sciences. An autoethnographic account makes the inevitability of subjectivity in conservation more transparent. This can be done in retrospect by critically reflecting on
personal experiences in considering the context and input for the decisions taken and actions performed. But it is even more useful when one is able to ‘do’ autoethnography while conducting research and performing treatments. Once it becomes part of one’s consciousness, all actions that are undertaken can be steered and adjusted according to new observations made during the process. It raises awareness on a meta-level, which is also helpful while conducting interviews. It allows one to be able to influence the narrative, which means that you can be much more in control while carrying out research or performing treatments.

P.B. - Among your modus operandi is also conducting artist interviews. As you have experienced personally, some artists’ views can change over time and even change the art they create. How should these changes with regards to the owner of the artwork and even the audience be addressed?

S.S. - This point illustrates the freedom of the artist and the more restrained attitude of the conservator, who is bound to conservation ethics and has a responsibility towards art history. Consulting artists in conservation requires a careful approach, as there is always the change of potential conflict because of those differences in approach. One way to overcome this is thinking out a conservation strategy beforehand and then involve the artists for consent. Another could be building a relationship based on mutual trust and respect for each other’s viewpoints. I think involving the audience in research on conservation strategies is certainly valuable and deserves much more attention in academic research. After all, conservation is about the way the artwork can be perceived and not only about how it is presented.

P.B. - In particular the conversations with Jan Dibbets seemed to be quite fascinating and illustrative of the function of a conservator’s testimony. What is it that struck you most in these complex negotiations with Ger van Elk, Jan Dibbets and Joseph Kosuth?

S.S. - This may sound strange, but becoming aware of my own role in the interviews struck me most. No matter how good you are in using interview techniques in order to remain as neutral as possible and to avoid interference in the artist’s statements, the interview is never an ‘objective’ truth. This awareness allowed me to analyze the meta-narrative that informed the interview material, making me able to interpret the source a certain way, which I then, of course, make explicit in a conservator’s testimony.

P.B. - It looks like if with conceptual art there is a more liberal attitude towards conservation and presentation, both from the artist and the institution. ‘Conservation ethics’ is the mantra that traverses your dissertation: respect for the original materials, integrity of the artwork and minimal intervention. What are the conclusions that the reader should draw from your experience?

S.S. - I think the importance of involving professional conservators when dealing with conceptual art both in a museum context and a research environment. For museums with contemporary art, it is important to know that there are conservators who are trained to deal with complex contemporary artworks and are capable of conducting qualitative research, which is invaluable to be able to make informed decisions in collaboration with curators and the artist. For research purposes, the manifestations of artworks can be extremely rich in information, but one needs to be able to extract this information in order to expose it as art technological source material. Conservators are able to ‘read’ physical manifestations especially well. I am not saying that materials cannot be renewed in conceptual artworks, but that the materials used are never insignificant. This is also true for new materials. Making a conceptual artwork manifest and visible to the audience deserves the full attention of highly informed professionals who are able to interpret the artwork in relation between concept and material. A final thing is the importance of documentation with conceptual artworks, as this may be the only thing left after display. Also, there is never one way. This is why it is so important to leave a testimony to make personal involvement as transparent as possible, in order allow complex artworks to enter the future in a most informed way.