

Panel Discussion *Installation Art in the Museum Context*

Seminar 'Theory and Semantics'

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Moderator:

Rutger Wolfson, director De Vleeshal, Middelburg

Panel members:

Martha Buskirk, associate professor of art history and criticism and author of 'The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art'.

Alexander van Grevenstein, Director Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht

IJsbrand Hummelen, senior researcher Netherlands Institute for Cultural heritage / ICN

Suchan Kinsoshita, artist

Sylvie Lacerte, coordinator DOCAM, Daniel Langlois Foundation

Pip Laurenson, senior conservator time-based media Tate, London

Marga van Mechelen, senior lecturer University of Amsterdam

Rutger Wolfson: As an outsider in this field, it has become clear to me that conservators are faced with a huge challenge. It's not easy to apply traditional values, ideas and techniques of conservators to contemporary installation art or to time-based arts. Today I heard several views and approaches on how to modernise the profession. Our discussion will be about how this could affect the museum practice. Should museums as an institution change in order to adapt to demands set by the changes in the art practice? But before coming to that I want to try, with the help of the panel members, to discern the different views presented here today.

Pip, you gave a very powerful metaphor in your presentation, the metaphor of the music score, an analogy between music and art. You said: A composer is ready when he has composed his music and the artwork is completed when the score is performed. Perhaps we could apply that analogy to the way art should be conserved. My question is: There are a lot of musical disciplines where there is a lot of flexibility in the performance part, like jazz music for example. Could you expand your analogy to that?

Pip Laurenson: I can try. The first thing I want to say is that analogies like that are very dangerous, because of course art isn't made with a score, and I think we have to resist the temptation to search for something like a score because it's really not like that. But it is a helpful analogy when you look at the different forms of practice. That is what I was trying to capture with the use of Steven Davies' idea of *thinly and thickly specified*. What we need to understand is the influence of the artists' practice to how, as custodians, we take the work forward. There are different ways of doing that, but what we saw in S.K.'s talk is that the whole relationship of collaboration is evolving. And I suppose what I was trying to make explicit is that we need to be taught and actually take that responsibility.

R.W.: Martha, would you be comfortable with the analogy between music and art, in terms of conservation?

Martha Buskirk: Actually, I think it's interesting that the Goodman book was published in 1968 which is exactly when LeWitt was evolving his concept of the wall drawing. So that actually, the distinction between art and music that Goodman was trying to make, was at a time when the notion of art was completely being *undone* by a very different notion of art making. So I think that in that sense an analogy is useful, but I also think that it goes back to those other issues - what kind of concept of art are we talking about and are we talking about a notion of conservation that is based on a very different notion of art. Obviously, that's been one of the issues, the focus today.

Suchan Kinsoshita: Not only the score is an interesting analogy with music, also the interpretation. The interpreters are the translators of the score, right? Somehow, I think that if you buy art or make an exhibition you also, as a curator or a director or anyone dealing with art, have to interpret – I don't mean like playing the pieces but to find a concept or to install the things. I think that notion has not been addressed very clearly in fine art. It was always there, this practice, but in music it's so beautiful that it has been given a role, a name, and a practice. It's something like *handwerkliche*, something very simple. I think maybe in visual arts we still need to create that role, which is not saying anything about the interpretation but just stating that it exists. We sort of ignored that part.

M.B.: What really interests me about this process of interpretation is how much it is motivated by what we want to see in the work as we're going back into it - this conundrum between desiring to bring the work back because of its historical importance but at the same time wanting something from it that maybe was never part of it in the first place. That maybe this relationship between art and audience that it is supposed to embody actually never happened. If we throw these very fragmentary documents together, we may come up with what we think the work is about in retrospect, and then try to bring it back conform the interpretation of today. Which is a little bit of a different take on interpretation than what you're talking about, but I think it is also part of this.

R.W.: S.L. and Marga van Mechelen spoke of a very specific approach, the Variable Media approach, which addresses the problem of works of art that use obsolete technologies and need to be updated or emulated to a different technology. Again, Martha, could you respond to this since you seem to consider the media to be very important.

M.B.: Aren't we saying today that it is very hard to make any kind of rules? You can argue that for one piece it might be incredibly important that it be projected as film whereas for another piece it might not be particularly important. And who determines that importance? Are we going back to the artist and ask for a statement, and then the artist's attitude may have changed over time, or are we making an assessment based on what we think the essence, or ideal, of the piece is? I would resist making rules, but of course that is my privilege as an art historian and critic –I can sit back and let somebody else try to come up with the conclusions and actually I can reserve the privilege of criticising them later, too.

R.W.: Yes, but you're welcome to do so now. If you were to criticise the Variable Media Approach, what would your criticism be?

M.B.: I'm not enough of an expert to come up with a sort of general criticism. I think it is important, as we go along, to think about what's at stake with each decision. There's a certain desire, very often, to see a kind of polish in the work as it is exhibited now – not just new media work, but a lot of work, when you actually go back and see a certain work that was produced in the early sixties, that was even part of minimalism, that had rough edges that were sanded away over time, almost quite literally. It's not really related specifically to the Variable Media project, but more to this sort of institutionalisation and bringing these works into the institutions and wanting to have some kind of drama to that presentation that I see.

R.W.: Pip, do you have a specific view on the Variable Media approach?

P.L.: I guess I've spent years trying to get to grips with why I have a problem with the Variable Media project, and I do. And I think one of the problems I have is the idea that filling in a database is not going to get us anywhere close to the sort of depth of discussion and experience we have seen with the project Suchan was talking about, here with the Bonnefantenmuseum and also with S.M.A.K. Not in terms of such collaborations and trying to really develop solutions. My issue has to do with how we start those dialogues and how they evolve, and how we open up those questions in terms of practice. Where I find it very useful is in the very intelligent opening up of different concepts. Thinking about behaviours helped people to reorientate their thinking. But what I would love to talk about is this whole issue of authority. One of the things I realised, reading it again – I did this interview with Bruce Nauman and I kind of failed horribly because we were talking about that very interesting case of where, with 'Art Make Up', he put the soundtrack of the film onto the video at the Walker in Minneapolis. He was saying that the reason he did that was because without the sound it was a really different experience. So I asked him: Does it matter that we lost the link, which might be described as 'authentic', between the actual medium itself and the sound? And he said: If you thought that was important, that was okay, you could show it as film. What I didn't do was come back and say: So what do YOU think? But obviously he was very happy to open up that issue of authority. It sounded like he was saying: the museum can make the decision that things are important, even though he might have at certain points made different decisions. I just find that whole discussion and how we navigate through that something really interesting to hear your (S.K.'s – ed) take on, because at some point you've had to let go of this piece.

S.K.: No, I don't believe in this sense of chronology – that first I have it and then I have to let go. I think it continues to be like letting go or getting involved. Not only in my piece, but you are of course asking about my position. I'm also very much in favour of misinterpretations. I don't think they can be avoided completely, or that we are completely in control. I think it's interesting for both artists and museums to get this dialogue from time to time, as a sort of exchange, because you do change as a museum, you do change as an artist, and the whole context of the artwork changes. Somehow you want to keep it fresh and re-engage with the work from another point of view.

P.L.: So, I have a problem because I'm employed by a museum and I have some responsibility to history. You see works and they've been updated, and you have no sense as a viewer of when they were made. I'm thinking, as an example, of Yoko Ono's 'Sky', which, you know, was a radical and extraordinary thing, and because you can't look at it now and it's on a coloured TV and it's totally

slick, you have no sense of when it was made, no sense of the moment of the statement. I just wonder if you think that is a problem in terms of how your pieces might go forward, that they'll lose all context of the time in which they were made.

S.K.: Maybe it's not either/or: maybe the historical moment is part of the whole – as I was trying to say before, from my point of view, it's not one statement. You have a historical moment, and maybe you want to keep that, as a historian, but you need to access that in a new way in order to understand what the historical moment *is*. So it's not solved by just keeping the outside box of the historical moment. If you have a slick moment, maybe that could be interesting in combination with a historical moment, because you see these different interpretations of a piece.

P.L.: So, here is this really interesting thing of what a museum should present in terms of the presentation of these works.

S.K.: A museum is always challenged to take a point of view, to deal with a work. Somehow it's also interesting that it does give a stand for that – that it doesn't say: this is the original, or the authentic, but that it says: this is my interpretation, or my way of seeing it, my view of history, even though it's from a long time ago. So it gets involved in the whole statement, not pretending that things just stay the same.

R.W.: Suchan, do you ever feel the danger of reduction? You showed the first version of your installation in Japan, and when you look at the version showed upstairs (in Bonnefantenmuseum, May 2006 – ed.), it is a completely different installation. I also got the feeling that this one is more practical in the sense that it has been installed in a way that it could be reinstalled again without you. Aren't you afraid that there's some reduction going on along the way in the name of conservation?

S.K.: I don't think there's a practical reason why it was put up like that. Maybe it is just another interpretation of that work. I suppose so. I think practical reasons shouldn't be a problem for a museum, but maybe I'm naïve. I think that would be very cheap, in a way, being so rich and so, let's say, luxurious, having all the means and the knowledge and the interest and the engagement in art - I think that the base would be to invest in the pieces you buy and an interest and an openness and a curiosity about it, right? And the discussion about it. I think that's the shift this work has taken, being put up like that and the difficulty for them to cope with my first try-out, let's say, of my setting it up here, which was going far beyond the thing that they bought. The limits weren't really clear; there was some sort of confusion about it, that's the bottom of our dialogue now.

R.W.: Alexander, did you feel like you had to be practical in this case?

Alexander van Grevenstein: We are talking about Suchan, an artist who is here and with whom we can speak. But of course there are examples of misinterpretation, like with Robert Rayman, the painter who is doing white paintings which he makes because there are white walls. Once a colleague of mine hung a white Rayman on a red wall, and Rayman wanted to sue him because it is a complete misunderstanding of what his work is about. Another time I saw a piece by Carl Andre,

who is the sculptor that threw away the base of a sculpture, consisting of a big piece of metal, a lead tile, and it was put on a pedestal. Sol LeWitt, who has already been mentioned, is in this respect a very strange person. He gives the impression that you are free to do what you want, like making a drawing on the wall; the lines not too short, not too long, not touching, and you think: let's start! And after two minutes you're making only the same lines, because by saying this, he really guides you to doing only one thing. If you try to make other lines it is just impossible. That's also quite strict.

So, Rayman is somewhat strict, Carl Andre is clear, you shouldn't make a pedestal, Sol is quite strict in his lines. When we acquired his piece, we never saw it. It was one of the few cases where I bought a work of art which I had never seen in real. What we did was showing it in several rooms of the museum, because that is what we have – now I'm getting really practical – rooms!. So we have the room where Suchan's installation is now. We have the big room, where we tried it as well, and so on. We made several try outs, looked how it would fit in these rooms. And somehow we were not too happy ourselves. All in all this took us, let's say, two, three, even four years. The last discussion we had a few weeks ago, and I think we found a solution. It will be very close to the installation showed in Japan (The Ginza Artspace, Tokyo, 2000, ed.), where you could force people to go in. Suchan made some changes, but not too many. So in Japan you could more or less enter it freely – not all the spaces, but still, and now that has probably become a little less. But in Japan it was placed in a gallery with not too many visitors. Here, a school class of thirty kids can come in and then, I'm sorry, but then the piece would be destroyed.

R.W.: But do you as a museum have the opportunity and the liberty and the means and the time to do that extensive research with every piece in your collection? Because four or five years for one installation is quite extensive.

A.v.G.: Yes, but not every day.

S.K.: I want to say this is a recent research which has just started, so it's really new, which also means that content-wise we are challenged to meet again with what they have actually bought. Because in fact you have to reset, so to say, what the piece is about, and I think that is a good thing, because I am challenged by it, by what it is, and they have to confront me. But I also have to confront them with what has happened until now, and so forth. So I think it has actually just started.

A.v.G.: As a museum, when you acquire a work of art, you are responsible to deal with it in an okay way, it's very simple.

R.W.: We're already precluding on the second part of what I wanted to talk about: If and how museums should change to accommodate works such as that of Suchan. I want to come back again to a distinction of different approaches in contemporary conservation. Marga, you said that the important thing to conserve is the ideal experience of the artwork, as implied by the installation itself. How could we do that? This might also bring back the authority question that Pip raised earlier.

M.v.M.: The first idea, I explained, is that it is not perfect. That implicates also that there is not *one* experience, there are several. I think the issue of the work of Suchan and how it was explained, that the audience in the Japan situation, when there was still that corridor, the décor and that corridor, was completely differently addressed than the actual situation we are confronted with here, now. And that is an implication of the work itself. Of course, there is an artist behind it who arranged it, but we can see its independence of the artist, we can see how the actual installation works. So, on the one hand you can say it is a process of six years, but within those six years the installation has known several audiences, several types of public. I think we have to recognise that and see what consequences this has for conserving the work.

R.W.: Sylvie, would that approach be something that you would be comfortable with?

Sylvie Lacerte: Yes, because with our project the artists are going to collaborate with the museums that are doing the case studies, and so whenever we get to the moment where we will be reinstalling the pieces, there will be some differences from the first instances. Maybe not with Greg Lynn, because Greg Lynn's piece is, so to speak, a kind of an incomplete work. It's still a work in progress and in the process of being acquired. But with Stan Douglas, I think he can be defined as an artist who thickly defines his work with all the requirements that he asks for the museums to install the piece. However, he's becoming more and more flexible now that he sees that he might not be able to do that anymore if he wants his piece to be reinstalled again. And I think he does, I don't think he wants it to disappear completely – I'm talking about *Nu*tká**, one of our case studies. So yes, I think that it redefines the role of the museum, of the conservator, but of the curator as well. We haven't talked about that much until now, but the curator can be the interpreter in a museum between the artist and the public, because he or she is the one who is installing the piece in the museum. I think it's really teamwork and we have to go forward toward that kind of collaboration, because otherwise we're going to meet a dead end. I don't think the artworks are going to be authentic anymore, especially if the artist is still around and we can work with the artist. I grant you that it's more difficult if we're dealing with a piece for which the artist is not around anymore, nor the technicians that were there to help him or her. That's a little bit more problematic, but there are many versions of authenticity, I think, according to how an artist sees his or her piece and the dialogue that he has with the museum and the conservator and the curator. So, as Suchan was saying, maybe we don't always have to find solutions but open up a dialogue. And that is certainly not in the old fashion of what museums have been up to till now. Even though they have a historical duty, I think that it can still be respected, with all this work.

P.L.: It's really important to hang on to the idea that we will lose things. Not the whole work, but actually, just like we have a concept of damage where our watercolour is faded, the Stan Douglas – we have a very clear idea of what look it should be. If we fail to be able to realise that, we've lost something and we've damaged it, and I think it's important to recognise that. And that is very different from some of the other, more fluid types of work. I just wanted to say that.

S.L.: I agree with you, Pip, because this particular piece, *Nu*tká**, is a piece that has to be done with barcode projectors, and if it's not done with that, you cannot get the sense of the piece that was originally wanted by the artist, and you're going to lose a lot of its essence and its meaning. So, of

course, museums have to stick to that mission, I think that's really important. But sometimes it is not possible, and so what do you do? Do you lose it completely or do you try to do something else?

P.L.: Well, you show it like you show your faded watercolours, but you acknowledge. I think there's an issue of honesty, here, and I think an awful lot of work we've talked about is based on good faith. I don't think it really recognises sometimes the difficulty of being honest within museums, in terms of having paid attention to the right thing, and actually then in terms of what we're presenting and how we're presenting it.

A.v.G.: Maybe the discussion is getting a bit too abstract and too formal. Let me say this: acquiring the installation by Suchan is acquiring the most difficult installation for this museum, for the organisation we have here. Why? Because there are open spaces, and it has the sensitivity that the moment you put something wrong, it really gets worse. From no other artist we acquired an installation with such a dangerous path. Why did we do it with her? Because she lives here. We can invite Suchan here every day, just to get it right.

R.W.: You're so practical.

S.K.: I think that is the danger: Because I'm here, I'm never asked.

R.W.: Let's move on to the museum. What surprised me, as I began to get acquainted with this subject, is that you could say traditional museums have a very traditional setup, which is all organised around the acquisition of works and their preservation for the future. It seems that precisely this preservation is far more complicated than it used to be. This may of course have far-reaching consequences for the museum and how it is organised. IJsbrand, what is your opinion on that? Should we reinvent the museum because we are also reinventing restoration and preservation?

IJsbrand Hummelen: Yes, I think so. If we move on with the definition, for instance, given by Pip on what conservation is, I see far-reaching consequences for the organisation of a museum, and also for the competence of the people working there. I think that most museums are still mainly object-orientated. Part of the museum work will always be like that, especially for objects like paintings in which the concept and the execution are coinciding. But now we have works in which concept and execution are two different things. We should realise that this execution part, which comes to curators and conservators, has not yet been fully discovered. Also Marga's definition of the ideal is a part of it, but we just don't know how to do it.

I am very interested in what I call embodied knowledge. It can be craft, but embodied knowledge is more than that: there is a lot of embodied knowledge present in conservators or other people working in a museum, and also in the organisation as a whole. Alexander started this morning with his example of writing, but he ended and said: "Well, there will be my follower, but I don't know how to...". You know, and there it ends. And even in Pip's story, what do you need - musicians, they embody it, they have a language to do it, they have the communication to do it.

We don't have a language to execute works of art. We can create all kinds of models, but still I see a gap, somewhere. And I think that Suchan's example is a very nice one, bringing us ideas that move towards that direction that - slowly, slowly - you have to embody this work in the museum, so

that the museum will also become part of the identity of the work, not only as a historical work. I see enormous challenges here. But yes, it has far-reaching consequences for the organisation of the museum. For instance, instead of art historians who are object-related, maybe you should have people who are more familiar with ethnography – how to do an interview, how to work with Suchan and how to reflect upon your own position in that process. This is a completely new field, which really needs attention.

S.K.: I forgot to mention, but I find it pretty interesting for myself that (*in*) this whole question of reinstalling my work I was in contact with restorars, and not with curators. That is really important, also contents-wise. The person who is interfering with or involving in the work, contents-wise, is the restorar. I must say that for me, this is new, also in this whole project, and I find it an interesting development, because it seems that they are working in another sort of logic and timing – they have another working floor, so to say. And I find that too something interesting to discuss.

R.W.: Yes, but you are very generous in your willingness to collaborate with the museum, also to try and find out how your work can be kept for the museum. Not every artist will be interested or be around to do that. Alexander, how are you going to deal with that?

A.v.G.: I don't know whether it takes a whole new kind of organisation or reinvention of the museum. Every twenty years or so you hear the museum should be reinvented. Maybe I am very old fashioned, but if the museum has modern work, classical modern works like from Picasso or Matisse, you need people who have an empathy for paintings . If you have the ambition of collecting installations, like we do, you need people who have an empathy for installations. But whether these people are so different, I don't know. The technique is different, and maybe we have technicians here who were there when... One and a half year ago we had a show with *Thomas Hirschhorn* and I can assure you that when you do a show with *Hirschhorn*, you have to redo your whole building. But our technicians were there, they worked with him. They worked on the installations we acquired, and they can tell their successors how to deal with it. And of course, when those technicians leave, we will ask them to pass on their knowledge to the next generation). It's easy. My successor as a director will do things in a different way, and otherwise, he should not be my successor. He should understand the work of Kounellis and the work of Sol Lewitt.

R.W.: Well, you make it sound like being a director or a conservator is a very easy job. You just listen to your colleagues or an artist to know how it's done. It must be more complicated than that. Things are also rooted in a more scientific tradition in history, It's more than just fraternising with the artist to get an idea of how it is done. I would like picking it up where IJsbrand left us. Pip, do you think the museum needs to be changed because the profession of the conservator needs to be different now?

P.L.: Actually, listening to Alexander, I was thinking that you mentioned curators and technicians, but maybe you don't hire any conservators here, I don't know. But as Suchan pointed out, the work is being done by conservators and these seem to be the people who are picking this up, to take the long view. It's not just a question of understanding how to interpret the work now, but how we take these works forward, and of course that's something that conservators have traditionally done

within their institutions. But, having said all of that, I do think there is a really interesting question here as to a dialogue that needs to happen, that really isn't happening, about whose role this is, and what our relation is to the curator. I've had curators come and talk to me and say: I'm curating a work with a living artist, and I actually don't really know what my role is, because the artist is making all the decisions, and the conservator is there, making sure it all happens, and it's all documented, and technically it's all realised. Their role is to make the catalogue. That's it. That's the discussion I'm really interested in having. Obviously it's something that needs to be done. Currently it's being picked up by conservators, but maybe if we're talking about the change of the museum, we need to look at how distinct those roles are. Obviously there are lots of ways in which the scientific training of conservators is absolutely crucial for many of the tasks they do. But what's interesting about what IJsbrand was talking about, is that maybe we have to feel comfortable about the fact that our traditional territory that's given us authority, which is the white coats and the magnifying glass and all the rest of it, actually isn't the territory which enables us to do a good job here, quite often. It's a different set of skills, and that I definitely agree with.

R.W.: What kind of skills would you need, and how could you organise that kind of expertise in a museum? And would that mean a change in how a museum is organised?

P.L.: There are two examples I will give. One is the importance of involving conservators in discussions around the point of acquisition. Not because we're the "police force", as we like to be seen, you know, like we are saying: 'no you can't possibly acquire that work', but because we are going to negotiate some of these spaces that are essential in order to successfully take this work forward into the institution. That's one way in which an institution needs to change. The other thing is where we've seen museums who function very successfully using a greater reach of teamwork and consensus and respect for each other's roles, is that dialogue across disciplines - breaking down departments and beginning to talk about some of these things. I think museums like SFMoMA have done this very effectively. That is how museums need to change. It's problems are best approached across disciplines.

R.W.: Thank you for your answer, which I thought was very to the point. You spoke about museums, but what about the expertise of the conservator? Or the division between the two?

P.L.: I'd love to talk about the division, but one of the interesting things about conservation training is that it teaches you a certain process of decision-making and maybe that's why we do well in this area. Because the way in which conservators make decisions and document how decisions are made is actually very pertinent. So there are things about our training which are already relevant, but there are other things that I think we all know in our working lives we're learning on our feet, which is about how to really deal with this need to communicate and this need to negotiate a clearer understanding.

R.W.: To coin the question is answering it. IJsbrand, you put the question forward, about maybe conservators not having the right kind of knowledge or background, or that it should be organised differently. How can this be improved?

I.J.H.: I was not only addressing conservators. I was addressing the whole museum organisation. I think Alexander puts it a little bit too easy, to say “well, you just have to know it” – just knowing it, as we’ve heard today, is a very complicated process. As soon as a museum is acquiring a work, immediately you need to do artist interviews, for instance. Pro-actively, you have to collect all this kind of information, you have to realise what kind of embodied knowledge you need in your organisation, how you can transfer this kind of knowledge, and you need the tools for it. As a conservator you are educated in a kind of scientific way, but that’s still a very positivistic scientific way – here things are merging, so as an interviewer, for instance, you have to be aware of your position. And that’s a consciousness, I think, which should be embedded in the whole organisation and not only in the conservator. I think the conservator has a very important position here, because the conservator is trained on the edge of practice and theory, and can bring the ‘making processes’ of an artwork in relation to the artist’s intent, which is a very specific area that in the future will be important for the work.

R.W.: Sylvie, do you agree? Is it a matter of applying different methodologies, of gathering the right kind of information around the collection that you are conserving?

S.L.: I think that the museum has to change overall. We shouldn’t put the weight on the conservator only, because it wouldn’t be fair. I think that they’re doing a lot of work to adapt their trade to the newer media, like the Tate is doing anyway, because they already have P.L. as head conservator for time-based media, so already the museum has changed at least towards that. And in Canada, in the museums that we’re working with in DOCAM, the conservators are the people that are really there from the beginning of the acquisition process. It’s not only the curators. I think what Pip was talking about earlier, the chasms that exist between each trade in a lot of museums, is a problem that needs to be resolved. And people have to learn to work together a little bit more. As we’re doing on our project, you know, we’re working with all kinds of different people. I think that’s the key, really, to changing the museum and changing the practice of either conserving, documenting, preserving or showing, exhibiting the work, and how we’re relating to the audiences. That also has to change.

R.W.: Alexander, do you agree? Do people who work in a museum need to collaborate more? Do conservators need to be involved in the acquisition of works right from the start?

A.v.G.: The answer to the last question is ‘no’, Let me explain. I am talking as a director of a small institution. In total there are thirteen people working here, guards included. If we don’t talk to each other on a daily basis something very strange would happen. Earlier, I worked in a larger institution, and yes, there are these kind of problems. But the biggest problem in a larger institution, and I might even mention Tate here, is bureaucracy. Art is pushed so tightly that all air has gone. It should not be the result of the process we are in now, of writing everything down, that you squeeze all the life out of it. I would always try to avoid bureaucracy in a museum. But to be honest, I think that in contemporary art, the same as with old art, one person should acquire, one person should buy. Of course, I also have a boss, which is a board of seven people, staff. But one person, who might be the curator, has to come up with it. And in the case of Suchan, if she comes with a proposal in which I don’t believe very much, I will still say that if she really goes for it, then of

course we will acquire it. The board of this museum should react like that too. They are, by the way, forbidden to even give ideas. So the moment a board member says: 'well, isn't it an idea to buy a Picasso', then he'll have his hands cut off, or his head or whatever. That's the deal we have made. So I think this choice in acquiring should be a very personal one.

R.W.: I'm going to stick to the subject. Martha, as an historian, do you think that museums as they are now need to reinvent themselves to accommodate to the issues we've talked about today?

M.B.: Haven't they already reinvented themselves? Because there's been a tremendous transformation in terms of the problems museums are willing to invite for themselves by inviting this kind of installation practice that we're talking about today. Actually, instead of curating objects, they are curating artists. And in the sense of curating artists, they are entering into these kinds of elaborate negotiation systems that we're talking about. So in that sense, there has been a complete transformation. To circle around to the question of expertise though, I think that you can't possibly anticipate the expertise that's going to be needed. Just as teaching at an art college - I can't in any way understand the expertise my student artists are going to need, because the range of expertise you would need to realise the kind of project you set for yourself, is at this point really impossible to anticipate. So instead of talking about specific instances, we might want to talk about rules of practice, but even there's a kind of an interesting contradiction, that I don't see any easy resolution for. That's the contradiction between the notion of maintaining a truth to the object and to the materials, and then maintaining a truth to appearance. That seems to be quite fundamental to a lot of what we're doing - there's a funny thing that's starting to happen when relics are re-entering the museum under those auspices, and it's interesting to think about that, particularly in relation to a kind of *survey museum* where things that were relics before are put out for exhibition and display. That kind of thing is re-entering, through a side door, in the contemporary practices.

R.W.: To stay with the subject of expertise, you said that it's almost impossible to anticipate the kind of expertise museums will need, because art is so diverse that it can be anything. You can't really organise yourself to have that expertise indoors, but maybe it can be organised in a different way. Maybe museums should not want to have all the expertise, but be organised in such a way that they can

M.B.: Some model of outsourcing?

R.W.: Insourcing, maybe.

M.B.: Certainly, and I assume that one of the things that is motivating the organisation behind this conference is having a database coming out of it. This notion of shared expertise - that no single conservator is going to carry the expertise to deal with this whole range of challenges - I guess as an art historian what disturbs me here is that it's still within one range of practices. I won't necessarily have access to this kind of information in order to research the work. It will still be a segment of a profession that is having that kind of communication.

P.L.: I just want to come back to the issue of acquisition which is interesting in the context of authority. You said very clearly, Alexander, that you didn't think conservators should be involved in acquisition...

A.v.G.: What I said is that if I want to do an acquisition, I decide and I'll go for it. But I would always, and we had many cases like that, ask a conservator whether a work made with such materials would be okay to acquire. Because when you acquire art, you are doing that for the future. I would not say eternity, but for the future. Also the art has changed. First we had the artist craftsman and now we have art which is only concept and almost nothing is written down.

P.L.: Actually, I did not disagree that you shouldn't make a decision about the acquisition. I think what we're talking about how as an institution we are actually becoming custodians for these works.

A.v.G.: Oh, but that's a whole other process.

P.L.: Well, for us it isn't, actually. I think that's the interesting thing. What we're seeing here is that there is such an anxiety that somehow this involvement in a process is threatening the authority of the curator, whereas actually that is not what is happening. But it's almost impossible to see that this is not happening because it's such a different way of working.

A.v.G.: I know that in many big institutions this discussion is going on. Very interesting, but it does not interest me. What interests me is that in that moment of acquisition, it should be a personal act, solo, very undemocratic...

R.W.: I'm sorry, that is also a very classical idea.

A.v.G.: ...but the process afterwards – conservation, restoration – is a multidisciplinary thing.

R.W.: But I think that's why Pip is also suggesting that in order to make that go smoothly, and to make sure that that process is well organised, the conservator should be involved at an early stage.

I.J.H.: Can I just ask you something? In our terms we would ask: what is the conservation object? What exactly do you preserve when you buy something? When you buy a conceptual work, even a *Sol LeWitt* – and I don't completely agree with you because with the wall paintings you do need to know how to execute them – or even the work of Suchan, do you realise what you buy? It's not the thing only, but it's the process that you buy. It's an involvement, and that means that you have a lot of other activities that you also buy.

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S.K.: Could I answer that question? I don't think Alexander was aware of what he was buying. But somehow it has created a lot of discussion now. And also, even though it's a small institution, communication isn't that easy. It is not as if you have a guarantee that you're on the level of good exchange and collaboration. Our communication has gone through desert times, you know. I wasn't

involved at all, I was around the corner, I wasn't involved the second time. You know what I mean? It is not as easy as that. Living in a small city such as Maastricht doesn't mean that we do collaborate more, or less. It's nothing to do with the size. It has to do with the mentality, with personal engagement. I think that makes a difference. So what is happening now, which I've really realised with this research project and which I find really very positive, is that we are both back in the boat, so to say, to re-install our view on what has been going on, evaluating, and also discuss what the work is. I think that is very fruitful, but it needed the big organisation, so to say, in order to get back in our small space. This is really interesting, psychologically. And talking about this conservator/curator thing, the experience I had with *S.M.A.K.* for instance, you know, with Frederika and Anne de Buck, is very extraordinary, also contents wise – we were going very deep into the discussion, what was necessary and what was not. They confronted me with questions; no curator had done that before about that work. It would be crazy to think that the curators wouldn't get things out of that. We should not just close down the departments. I think this is really clear, that things are overlapping in this whole dynamic. I mean, you are exchanging and stealing from each other, but in good way.

A.v.G.: Just a short reaction. We really *did* know what we were acquiring. What we knew was that we were acquiring a process. And of course we knew that things were not fixed. We knew very well that we were not acquiring an object. All the work done now is great as long as it does not lead to a bureaucratic way of solving problems later. That is what I would not like to happen.

R.W.: As a final round of questions I am going to make a proposal and maybe you can react on this. It sounds like it is almost logical that in the future museums will get rid of the division between the different types of jobs, of the conservator and of the curator. It will be much more one kind of job, in which the essence is that they work with artists, either to make a show, or to make a show and acquire a piece and to then, while working with the artist, determine the right kind of methodology for the preservation of the work. And there will also be really specific technical knowledge embodied somewhere in the museum – what kind of materials to use, what not. Would that be a more logical construction for a museum than what museums are now, that you have a distinction between the curator who makes the shows and the conservator who takes care of the collection?

I.J.H.: You forgot the registration and documentation part, and I think that is becoming a very important part of the institution. What you see now, for instance, in documentation is that you have a documented correspondance with the artist here, and most conservators have their own documentation there – it's very much spread around in all those institutions. The documentation discipline should be much more scientific too, because the documentation in itself will be a very important part of the work, especially in the first execution of a work, for instance, the interviews and so on. That is a really important part of the work. And that is still not a normal procedure in most institutions. So I think that it should become more an attitude of the whole museum. Personally I don't think we should focus on curator/conservator differences.

P.L.: I want the discussion. I don't necessarily want the roles to merge. And I'm really happy with curators deciding on a set of criteria about what it is that we should be collecting, and then for us as

an institution to move forward to effectively carry those work into the future. I think my training is much better suited to the latter job and I don't want to get involved in the former.

R.W.: Okay. I saw a microphone walking around and I'm sure there will be questions.

Karen ter Brake - Baldock: I have a very interesting suggestion, from a totally different world. I was visiting the European Centre for Space Technology, which is in Holland, in Rijswijk, basically a European version of NASA. It was really interesting – I saw satellites and how they're all built and tested, shaked and baked. And they had this very interesting approach to transferring knowledge within their organisation. When they work on projects, a project that is fifteen years old is a baby to them. They work on projects that are twenty-five, thirty, fifty, sixty years long, to build something to go up to the moon and come back down again. So when they start a project, they start hiring young people that have just come out of their schools. So it's really interesting to see that these people, they will work on something for twenty-five years, almost like a curator and a conservator may indeed work on your installation for many years. So that was one approach. And they also had a quite elaborate interviewing procedure. They interview each other over the years, and collect all that data. I mean, these are total scientific nerds, they sit behind the computer, but they had those skills. I don't know where they come from, probably from sociologists, anthropologists, I don't know. So two things I thought... I mean, not that we all want to lose our jobs so the really young people get in, but I thought it was an interesting thing, to see that.

R.W.: Who has a question, either in response to the space/age solution, or to anything else? I'm sure there must be.

Guest 1: I want to ask Suchan, since she is the only artist here and she's in two of the project cases, if she has some good advice for me or some other researchers in our research.

S.K.: Researchers in conservation, you mean?

Guest 1: I'm doing the *Barrio* case and I see that is not always easy, the communication with the artist. It's sometimes very fragile. So I want to ask you if you have some good advice on how to approach, or how not to force.

S.K.: Patience, probably. I think there is no recipe, because everyone is probably completely different. But what I experienced as very inviting was the time scale – some comes back in your proposal, in a way (*pointing at Karen, ed.*). There is no deadline, necessarily. The notion of research I find very inviting, I must say, because it opens up a curiosity. It's not trying to force a solution to solve the problem, but when the problem *is* solved, you will probably get to know about it, you will realise it. So it's not like a *tour de force*. I really found that generous attitude in my experience with S.M.A.K., because there we've gone through a really long period of research. There was never this idea of 'we have to finish tomorrow', or these sorts of things. And even now, I think one could come up with certain questions or so. It's not about... there is no anxiety that the artist should endlessly be involved, as a sort of '*lastpak*', a bother. There's really just interest, so you also leave each other alone, not forcing a sort of communication. I think that is really special, I

must say. Whereas, for instance, in the other art world, the art world with, let's say, curating – in shows, you always have deadlines and you are confronted much more with some strange sort of forced values. This could be positive or negative, either you're fantastic or you're nothing. It's always very tough in competing with other institutions, other curators, other shows, other *biennials*. I think this sort of research now is completely outside of that sort of stress, which, amazingly, creates interesting communication.

Guest 2: Suchan, I'm sorry to ask you another question. I think you've done a lot of work this afternoon. It was really just in relation to your last point. Obviously, a work that is in a collection is in a sense privileged. It enters a privileged space. And you have this time to think about a lot of these questions and to create this dialogue. It has this opening. I'm interested in the various iterations that the work has gone through. It strikes me that this is a feature of installation art, that conservators are kind of embracing this notion that a work goes through various iterations. There are differences involved with each manifestation, if you like. With works of yours that haven't been collected – that are maybe in the studio, which are maybe dormant, I don't know. Have you felt that this process has transferred to how you think about other works of yours, which perhaps aren't collected but which you show in temporary situations. Has that influenced your practice in that way?

S.K.: I tried to show that with the example of the loudspeaker, which has really been part of my practice, and that was not collected at all. There are many pieces that are reused in different constellations again and they pop up in different settings. I think that it is really part of my practice. So it's not something that is occurring because of this research only, but the research gives me space to not experience this only as a burden, but as a creative process. And I think that's interesting because that is really very rare.

R.W.: Unless there is someone who has an urgent question, maybe it's time to round up. It's been a very long day. I think some of the points of our discussion that could contribute to improving things in a museum are better communication and a better organisation of how documentation is organized and managed so that people from different areas of expertise can learn from it and use it. Also, Suchan added that museums should cherish the fact that they can have the slow time in which they can do research into installations and how to preserve them, as opposed to the sometimes very hectic and fast times when they have to compete with other museums in getting an international profile. Thank you all very much.

The panel discussion was prepared by IJsbrand Hummelen and Vivian van Saaze (PhD student Maastricht University / ICN) with moderator Rutger Wolfson

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