

Research on Artists' Participation

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Introduction

Each period in the history of art makes specific demands on the researcher. Research into contemporary art requires a range of tools and approaches that differ fundamentally from the methods applied to earlier periods in art history. Not only has the versatility of production increased exponentially since 1950, but in addition the way in which it is embedded in society, both physically and philosophically, has changed profoundly. The conservation departments of institutes concerned with art production during the latter half of the twentieth century are confronted with this on a daily basis. An entirely new arsenal of materials, and especially combinations of them, has found its way into museums. In the field of conceptual art, the idea takes precedence over the materiality and the erection of installations outside the museum walls challenges restorers in more ways than one. At the same time, there is a whole new range of opportunities and possibilities because the context in which contemporary art is being produced has fundamentally changed compared to earlier periods. For example, the source material, which can be analyzed by scientists, can give new dimensions to scientific research and restoration. And one of the most crucial opportunities for the conservation researcher is that the artist himself can often be consulted as a primary source, through an interview or in direct collaboration.

Primary and secondary sources

A historical source is an object or text which provides us with information. We can speak of a primary source if the information comes to us directly, for instance, in the form of an eyewitness report or an interview. Secondary sources are based on primary sources (or other secondary sources); they are processed by an original source. It is not only the artist who is a primary source. Also contemporaries, colleagues and others who are part of his circle can contribute important information as eyewitnesses. The further we penetrate into the artist's network, the more cautious we need to be in dealing with the data we collect. Thus, in many cases a gallery manager may have been closer to an artist for a longer period of time than, for instance, a fellow artist who worked with him or her for only a brief period. In this case, one could say that the first one mentioned will be more useful as the stories passed on to others and the insights based on information acquired from others, are secondary sources. However, secondary sources may still provide valuable information. All sources must be appraised critically within their own right and information must always be checked. This can be done by comparing them with other sources; information from an artist about materials can, for example, be compared with the results of scientific research.

Research focus

In agreement with its long-term research into artist participation in the conservation of contemporary art, the S.M.A.K. organized several activities for the *Inside Installations* project. Based on various available methods and source material from diverse scientific disciplines, the research started to take shape. The broad framework, to which the actual artist participation is a significant contributory factor, was studied in the light of anthropological and sociological reference works.¹ What we learned from the field of anthropology, is that social interaction always indicates observation,

participation and communication. 'Communication' is often arranged in the form of an artist interview, in which data is assembled. 'Observation and participation' are often organized as collaboration between artists and conservators with an exchange of experiences. Both approaches provide an opportunity to examine why and how an artist is working the way he does.

Methodology

Artist interviews

Based on the research material gathered from diverse partners in the project, it became clear that the form or way in which information is being transferred depends on the choice made by the researcher and artist together. Artists also often put forward their own ideas about information transfer. Because this information is entwined with the artist's individuality, a first step in the approach can be distilled from the artist's activities in this respect. In practice, it will gradually become clear where the information gaps are and, with this in mind, questions can be formulated, based on the artist's mental framework, and in relation to future conservation activities, presentations and changes to which the *oeuvre* is likely to be subjected. The interview arranged with the purpose of acquiring general guidelines for dealing with a body of work in all its aspects requires intensive preliminary investigation. Works of art, which represent the nucleus of that body and use diverse media within it, may be the backbone of the interview structure. In fact, an artist interview is a research interview. A qualitative research interview aims to listen to and learn from the stories, told by the subject, and told from his or her perspective. This kind of interview adheres to a certain structure and targets a clearly-defined goal. In terms of actual conservation practice, this means hearing the artist's opinion on the re-installation and conservation of the *oeuvre*.

The research group of B2 Artist Participation participated in the 32nd Art and Art Historians Annual Conference in Leeds (5-7 April 2006), in which a two days session on the topic 'The Artist Interview: Contents and Contentions in Oral History/ Art History' was organised.² Oral history was investigated as a research tool in museums, galleries, conservation departments, archives and libraries. Starting from the historiography of this format in the early 1960s, the widespread availability of the recording equipment (and then other digital communications technologies later on) has meant that researchers can not only listen to recordings, but can also easily conduct such interviews themselves. Oral history became an important component of inter-textual thinking, forcing the reconsideration of other documentary sources and drawing attention to the mediated nature of interpretation.

The complicated status and function of the artist interview, recorded on tape, film, video or DVD was discussed with an international group of researchers. Subjects like the character and directness of the spoken word and how to deal with the differences between the edited and unedited versions of the interview were examined. Also the authenticity of the artist's voice as a primary source and the role, position and expertise of the interviewer are also of major importance within the field of Art History.

Methods for interviewing and artist participation within the project were further investigated by doing interviews with conservators and conservation researchers. The study was developed in collaboration with B1 Preservation. The practice of interviewing and collaboration is present in every participating institute. Various opinions about pre-research, interview structures, transcripts and analyse methods as well as the evaluation of the results, were shared.

Based on the B2 Artist participation research, some general insights emerged:

- Often a combination of communication methods is used to investigate an installation artwork (such as an exchange of letters, telephone calls, questionnaires, interviews, other forms of collaboration)
- We are dealing with people; the influence of emotions on the process of cooperation should not be forgotten
- An interview has an individual and subjective character, the relation with the artist has a big impact on the result
- It is recommended to conduct the interview in the artist's studio or gallery
- Language differences between the interviewer and the interviewee can be overcome by using multilingual vocabularies
- Conservators of contemporary art are also facilitators
- Before doing the interview, it is important to make a reconstruction of the history of the artwork within the institution to find out what was bought and which parties have been involved
- Never forget how 'pragmatic' a motivation can be
- The idea of artist participation can be expanded into participation with the general public. Besides an artist interview, a discussion with the artist and the public can bring new insights

Interactions with artists and works of art

With a view on the research taking place into installation works of art, we have noticed that the interaction with the work of art within a collection can differ strikingly from the situation of setting up a temporary exhibition. Often, an installation is part of a temporary exhibition in the first place and is then acquired. From the moment the work is included in a collection, there are usually several conservation aspects to be investigated. For us as conservation institutions it is important to investigate this interplay with the work of art, for example the way in which installations are exhibited and conserved. Installations have extremely diverse characteristics and are probably the most difficult cases to chart. Aspects like variability, reproduction, performance, electronic media and interaction are incorporated in many works. Ready-made answers for dealing with these works do not exist. Here, research lies at the heart of the quest for solutions and is preferably the framework for an interactive thought process between artist and researcher. Interactive research resulting in guidelines for individual works of art is the basis and often the only guarantee for the continued existence of the work. Should no communication exist in this regard, then one would have no idea of how to tackle these works after their initial installation. An installation might remain 'unvaryingly' installed and often disintegrate because of its fragility.

Experience: a living source of information

Contemporary artists often see the process itself as 'material' of their work, as an array of possibilities of which they are fully aware. The work process becomes part of the product and the product is shown within a certain context. The variable aspects are part of the work and need to be included in the technical specifications. A specification is an ongoing discussion, is not finite but does acknowledge constant relationships. It is a living source of information, never finished, the fruits of experience. How we describe experiences and whose experiences they are, is relevant in this research question. Everyone is agreed that the artist's experience is the cornerstone here. Additionally, in a collection, the administrators' experiences are related to the work. In this way, they provide a framework for the work and transport it further in time.

Seminar Artist Participation

In October 2006 and as co-organizer of *Inside Installations*, the S.M.A.K. organized the seminar 'Artist Participation'. The gathering, which enjoyed broad public attendance, aimed at positioning the interactive tools available to assist artist participation in a broader setting. An effort was made in compiling the program to highlight common ground with other disciplines. Several results of co-operation between artists, conservation researchers and museums were presented at this seminar. Professionals with experience in interviewing artists shared their knowledge and a general framework was given by theorists from other disciplines, including anthropology and sociology. In the course of the day a number of possibilities in the field of artist participation and the results were elucidated: the e-interview, collaboration in executing variable installations and creating a performance manual were included in the program.

Interview training and transcription workshop

Although conservators are often confronted with interviewing an artist, the majority of conservators have never undergone training for this. Nevertheless, in their communication with the artist they need to be familiar with certain basic principles so that the required information not only is acquired efficiently but also that the interviewee is not offended in any way. Thus, on the second day of the seminar, a workshop for interviewing techniques was organized. During the interview the interviewer usually collects copious amounts of information. This material also needs to be processed; it must be usable and therefore applicable in relation to the conducted research. Furthermore, it is clear that the information also needs to be accessible for third parties, such as in our field colleagues within and across museums. In other words it is advisable that the interview be transcribed. A workshop on this topic was also organized. By means of these two workshops, the interview training and the transcription workshop, a possibility was created of applying the acquired knowledge at a scientific level in the field of the conservation of contemporary art.

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² http://www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk/matrix_engine/content.php?page_id=3037