

Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art

Research on preservation strategies

Part 1: Risk Assessment

Written by Pip Laurenson
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The Inside Installations workshop 'Risk Assessment' took place at December 7 & 8, 2006 in Tate Modern, London

Participants of the workshop Risk Assessment were:

Bart Ankersmit (ICN)
Reinhard Bek (Museum Jean Tinguely)
Bryony Bery (Tate)
Agnes Brokerhof (ICN)
Anne de Buck (S.M.A.K.)
Paulien 't Hoen (SBMK)
Frederika Huys (S.M.A.K.)
Kate Jennings (Tate)
Pip Laurenson (Tate)
Vivian Van Saaze (ICN)
Tatja Scholte (ICN)
Sanneke Stigter (Kröller-Müller Museum)
Arianne Vanrell (MNCARS)
Tina Weidner (Tate)

Introduction

Traditionally, risk assessment has been used in conservation to examine risks to entire collections and to establish priorities, often with regard to preventative conservation measures¹. Recently this approach has been expanded to consider the risks associated with 'ensembles'; for example rooms in historic houses². This work indicated interesting parallels to artists' installations, in that in both cases the value of the individual components is, in part, determined by its relationship to the whole ensemble.

The Benefits of Risk Assessment

The risk assessment approach provides the following benefits as a method of developing a conservation plan for a complex artwork:

- It provides a more or less rational ranking of risks based of their expected magnitude which allows for setting priorities in treating or reducing them
- It facilitates the involvement of key stakeholders in shared decision making; politically this can help create 'buy-in' for conservation efforts across an organisation
- It requires that participants think more holistically about what it is that is important to preserve for the whole installation. For example it encourages decision makers to consider both the tangible and intangible aspects of an installation rather than simply considering the material elements.
- It pools expertise in considering where the greatest risks lie of not being able to display the work in the future.
- It encourages strategic thinking

Although clearly the main goal of any risk assessment is to come up with a plan which will benefit the long term care of a work of art or collection; the process in itself has a number of added benefits. In particular it provides a space for structured thinking about the assumptions of the different stakeholders and their notions of value and risk.

Methodology

Following two meetings in Amsterdam and building on the work carried out by the Dutch case study researchers for Jeffrey Shaw's work "Revolution", Agnes Brokerhof adapted currently used methodologies to be applied to installation artworks. A group of 13 case study researchers were recruited to work together to learn more about risk assessment and test the methodology on their case studies.

This group of case study researchers 'met' via conference calls every week during the months of October and November 2006. During each conference call the group was introduced to a consecutive homework assignment in preparation for a two day workshop at Tate Modern, London. During this workshop each participant carried out the actual qualitative, semi qualitative or quantitative assessment of the risks to their installation.

The stages of the methodology are as follows:

1. Establishing the anatomy of the installation
2. Developing a 'Statement of Significance'
3. Determining the relative value to the whole of the elements identified

¹ Examples include the work of Rob Waller - Waller, R.R. (2003) Cultural property risk analysis model: development and application to preventive conservation at the Canadian Museum of nature. Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Goteborg, Sweden and Jonathan Ashley Smith - Ashley-Smith, J. (1999) 'Risk assessment for object conservation', Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 358 pp. and Stefan Michalski - Michalski, S. (1990) 'An overall framework for preventive conservation and remedial conservation'; in Preprints of the 9th Triennial Meeting of the International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation, Dresden, ICOM, pp. 589-591.

² Brokerhof, A.W., Luger, T., Ankersmit, H., Bergevoet, F., Schillemans, R., Schoutens, P., Muller, T., Kiers, J., Muething, G., and Waller, R. (2005) 'Risk Assessment of Museum Amstelkring: Application to an historic building and its collections and the consequences for preservation management'; in Preprints of the 14th ICOM-CC Triennial Meeting, The Hague, pp. 590-596.

4. Developing scenarios and identifying the risks
5. Exploring the possibility of recovering lost value
6. Carrying out a qualitative or (semi)-quantitative assessment of risks

Results

Given that risk is expressed in terms of expected loss of value in the future, risk assessment proved to be a valuable tool for creating a dialogue within the museum about what is important to preserve for any given installation. Where traditional preservation is very much oriented towards the material aspects of an artwork or collection, the preservation of installations focuses much more on the intangible. This exercise allowed participants to reflect on their perception of the 'object' and on their working practice and also to gain insight into their decision making processes. "It rationalises your intuitive everyday way of working" was the comment of one participant.

The value of a statement of significance

Understanding the significance of a work of art is vital to designing an appropriate preservation strategy. "A statement of significance should be a reasoned, clear summary of the values, meaning and importance of an object or collection"³. One very practical way for a conservator and curator to jointly develop a statement of significance, is to relate it directly to the process of interviewing artists about the preservation and presentation of their work. This builds on the value of artist's interviews as a key element in the development of good practice for the care and management of installation art.

Recoverability

Traditional preservation has a strong emphasis on 'authenticity' and 'originality' of material. Hence, in risks assessment the possibility of restoration of lost value is usually considered separately from the actual assessment. For works of art which include technology-based components or elements that are mass produced, replacement of parts and recoverability of lost functionality are often considered as part of standard maintenance. Therefore for these works it was considered important that the possibility to recover lost value was brought into the risk assessment. This uncovered a shift in thinking for conservators and meant that the specific value associated with 'original' components proved more complex than that assumed in traditional risk assessment.

Time

All museums, including contemporary art museums, plan for their collections to last 'a very long time'. Within a contemporary art context, the survival of a work of art is not always synonymous with the survival of a specific unique material object or set of objects. In some installations elements can be substituted without significant loss to the work and in others, the fact that the work has no permanent material remains is central to its nature. In the case of traditional objects the two main models of deterioration are: gradual accumulative damage or catastrophes. Eventually the small, but high probability, accumulative effect of minor losses will lead to the same magnitude of loss as the low probability catastrophe. Hence probability and consequence have a similar weight on the final magnitude of risk. Does this model work as well for all contemporary works, in particular technology-based works of art?

Technology based works of art have different modes of failure - in some cases we can predict at what point (after how many hours of usage) a piece of technology will fail. As its function is usually very important to the installation, this failure brings about sudden high loss. This loss can, in many cases, be mitigated by repair and the value recovered. Obsolescence is another very particular type of failure. How then can we best factor in to our risk assessments both the way in which these elements fail and their recoverability?

³ Australian Heritage Collection Council 2001 "A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections"

Shifting Roles

Because the risk assessment methodology highlighted the different risks and vulnerabilities of artists' installation it provided a point of focus for the participants to reflect on their changing role as conservators. This linked to the second point of focus for the B1 activity (see below).

Areas of future research and development for the risk assessment methodology:

- The development of a framework for assessing the value of different elements of an artist's installation and a method of determining their 'relative value'.
- A method for incorporating recoverability in the final assessment and evaluation risk
- The development of reference scenarios specific to the risks associated with installation art
- The generation of applicable data on the rates of loss and 'mean-time-to-failure' of materials and components used in installations

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*Read further: Inside Installations, Research on Preservation Strategies Part 2
'The shifting role of the conservator'.*