

Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art

Research on preservation strategies

Part 2: The shifting role of the conservator

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The impact of changing artistic practice was considered in relation to the changing role of the conservator and the curator. This theme was explored in two ways: firstly the changing role of the conservator was explored through a series of interviews conducted with conservators involved in the project; and secondly, via a conference held at Tate Modern in March 2007 entitled "Shifting roles and shifting practices: Artists' Installations and the Museum". This conference invited curators, conservators, art historians and an economist to reflect on the impact of changing artistic practice on the role of the curator and as well as the conservator and ultimately the museum. Universities across Europe were invited to join an on-line forum to discuss the issues. The archive from this forum and a web-cast from the conference are available via the project website.

Six in-depth interviews were carried out with conservators and two with conservation researchers. These interviews provided a wealth of information regarding: their training as conservators; their thoughts on having made the transition from working on traditional media to contemporary art; their experiences of working with artists; their professional influences; and where they felt gaps in their knowledge lay. Metadata from these interviews will be made available via the INCCA database. This study was done in collaboration with activity B2 Artist participation.

Key findings

Knowledge gaps:

Of the conservators interviewed, all had been trained as traditional conservators before specialising in contemporary art conservation. It was clear that they valued their traditional training highly and felt that, in order to deal with the complexity of artists' installations, it was an advantage to have a firm grounding in traditional conservation which covered a range of materials and types of collection, as well professional ethics, the history of conservation and collection care strategies. They felt that their traditional conservation training had provided them with decision making and problem solving skills and that they had built on this, in their work in the field with artists' installations. The conservators interviewed had different views on whether there were major gaps in their training. Some felt that there were major gaps in specific areas of materials research; in particular plastics and electronic media. Whereas others felt that although further research was needed in these areas it was not necessarily something they would expect to gain from their formal training but rather experience that they would learn in the field. Interestingly none of the conservators interviewed thought that their training should have provided them with skills in collaborative working, negotiation, and communication which clearly were key aspects of their roles as contemporary art conservators. All of the conservators saw themselves engaged in ongoing learning and were in the habit of reflecting on their practice.

Key differences between working as a conservator of artists' installations and more traditional works:

A number of conservators interviewed mentioned the need for a slightly different skill set when working with artists' installations.

- Firstly, many found that documentation had a different role and status for artists' installations. One of the primary meanings of the term 'documentation' used by conservators is to describe the process of recording structure and condition. Documentation for artists' installations has a more dynamic meaning, referring to a conservation tool designed to mitigate the risk of not knowing how to install and display the work correctly in the future. Because artists' installations only truly exist in their installed state, a critical aspect of their conservation involves knowing how they should be installed.
- Secondly, a number of conservators described the need to work with a broad group of people in the care and management of these works and draw on a broad range of expertise.
- Thirdly, the conservators involved in the project had all experienced the process of working with the artist to ensure that they understood what was important to preserve and to develop strategies for conservation and display. In many cases this involved close collaboration over a number of months, if not years. Conservators often provided valuable solutions to enable the artworks to continue to be displayed. In some cases, conservators had become involved in aspects of the production of the artwork, whereas other conservators felt it was important to keep these roles distinct. There is sometimes a fine line between the role of the conservator and the producer; where problem solving can become a part of production. Although becoming involved in production can feel uncomfortable for conservators, one conservator expressed the view that this gave them a better understanding of the artist's practice and helped them to develop appropriate conservation plans for the work. All installation works require a moment when the artwork is realised in the space. In some cases, for example an instruction piece (maybe a sand carpet or wall drawing), the work is produced entirely by members of staff in the museum following the instructions provided by the artist. Understanding how to do this requires learning the skills important to the proper execution of that work, often from the artist or their assistant. This is another example where conservators may become involved in the production of the work, often being responsible for the documentation of the process and, along with other museum staff, holding the memory of how to install the work for the museum.

One of the questions asked was "What would you tell a conservator new to artists' installations?" here are some of the answers

- Make sure that your organisation understands what it is you are trying to do and is on-board
- Build a network of other conservators working on similar problems
- Think into the future – what will people need to know in 50 years' time?
- Look for information and support from a broad range of sources – don't expect conservation literature to have the answers; many of the problems you come across will have little precedence in conservation.
- Step back and look at the artwork as a whole, don't only focus on the preservation of the material elements.

The Importance of Networks

Many conservators spoke of how important it had been in their careers to have had opportunities to meet other conservators working on similar problems. Many gave credit to "Inside Installations", "Modern Art: Who Cares?" and INCCA for building these networks.

Conclusion

Contemporary art conservation remains a small field and many museums and arts institutions which show and collect artists' installations do not have access to conservators with this expertise. It is therefore important to recognise that it is not only the roles of conservators which have shifted due to changes in artistic practice but also the roles of a range of other professionals working in the arts. Across Europe different structures are emerging as institutions try to address the challenges of these works. The project participants recognise the need to reach beyond the conservation community and those already familiar with contemporary art conservation. The challenge of the long term care and management of installation works of art is best met collaboratively and the hope is for the results of this project to reach the broad range of professionals who are charged with making decisions about the preservation and presentation of installation art, for example, directors, trustees, collection managers, researchers, archivists, installation managers and registrars.

*Read further: Inside Installations, Research on Preservation Strategies Part 1
'Risk Assessment'*