

The Conservation of a Work that « Never Stop Starting »  
Or How to Create an Installation Guide for Joëlle Tuerlinckx's *'un ensemble autour de MUR*, 1998

"It never stop starting". This is the title of an interview with Joëlle Tuerlinckx, given in 2001 during the exhibition at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht. It was with this sentence that I encountered her work for the first time as an art student. I couldn't have guessed that I would be brought a few years later to attempt to conserve a work that was never frozen in time.

Presenting Joëlle Tuerlinckx's work in a few lines is a difficult exercise. Were I to attempt it, I would use the metaphor of a diagram, the abscissa of which would be the exhibition space, and the ordinate, her sculptural practice as gesture or movement towards the perception of the givens of this space. The meeting points would form a curve that some critics have identified as an archaeology of everyday life or, more precisely, an archaeology of the fluid.

These meeting points are the exhibitions; the givens of one exhibition are thus suffused with those of a preceding one. This was the case with *un ensemble autour de MUR*, which had its origin in another exhibition, *this book, LIKE A BOOK*, that took place at the S.M.A.K. while the museum was still under construction. This exhibition was a record of Joëlle Tuerlinckx's own museography, composed of the remains of exhibitions accumulated over several years. On this occasion, this museographic ensemble was integrated into the exhibition space, spread out in a large display and among these remains, the paper documents were transformed into volumes, or into those objects which are books. In her work, the term object is not to be considered in the traditional sense. Rather, an object is, I quote, "a visible and palpable manifestation of my own thought. In reality, they are sorts of tools that help me see and that I eventually name, grouping them under the generic term 'objects', for example: *barres, bâtons, volumes, boules, boulettes*". This function of objects as tools for the perception of space will be emphasized throughout this study.

Thus through a combination of circumstances, the object which is the word ~~MUR~~ – a slide projected on a mobile scaffold tower - was at the origin of a new work: *un ensemble autour de MUR*. This ensemble provided an occasion to reflect on and around everything that words evoking the

vocabulary of the museum can trigger in the perception of a space of representation.

A first presentation took place when the museum opened in 1998. This was followed by three other presentations up to 2003, for which the artist proposed three variations, or applications, adapted to the changing context of the museum.

In these variable conditions, how can this work be conserved without the intervention of the artist? How the objects be considered as tools that make the work evolve, without their conservation resulting in fetichization? This was not only the museum's concern but also the artist's, who from the very beginning had created a certificate that would enable future interpreters to invent new applications, in the same way a musician interprets a partition. The certificate is thus the guarantee of the work's permeability, its adaptation to the space. It is the key to the structure of the work and one of my tasks was to understand how it worked.

A third person was required to put the certificate to the test and if necessary, readjust and supplement it while respecting the artist's intentions. The aim was to make this certificate, through its analysis, into an installation guide.

However, the analysis of the certificate alone would not have sufficed to extend the intentions of the work in time. Another means of access had to be found. This other means was collaboration with Joëlle Tuerlinckx since I was her assistant at the time I began this project. Following her in the different stages of her work process gave me access to an enormous quantity of information. Conservators sometimes complain about the unavailability of artists and the lack of information. I had the opposite difficulty; I was constantly receiving new information since, with each conversation - in the studio, at the exhibition sites or while driving from one place to another - Joëlle would suggest new points of view. So the question was how to retain this information and sort through it with a view to the elaboration of a synthesis for the future installation guide.

We established three approaches to the recording of information. The first was the transcription of her words in notebooks, as a sort of continuous interview, dated as one would a journal. Information was accumulated there without any real structure, but on rereading these notes, I tried to identify

themes, such as: information on the fabrication of the objects, on a concept, on positioning oneself to photograph a space, on taking into account an accident, the intervention of chance, retaining one thing rather than another, identifying the characteristics of a space and many other things as well. For all that, these notes do not have the authenticity of an interview. They were not the direct transcription of the words of the artist since my own subjectivity entered into account in the process of note taking. The museum suggested we record these dialogues, but this would have meant recording continuously since it was not necessarily foreseeable what event would give rise to a remark, and this form of surveillance tended to inhibit the actualization of the artist's words as she attempted to express a thought provoked by something unexpected. We therefore abandoned the idea of recording and favoured the journal.

The second approach was a counterpoint to the journal. It consisted of periods of focalization where we tried to gather together all the information concerning one theme or object. For example, for *l'objet noir*, an emblematic element of the artist's work, a series of questions I sent her by e-mail enabled us to produce a text that transcribed her thoughts directly. She added questions when she thought it would be useful to discuss points I had not thought of. We supplemented the whole with texts and quotations from her own archives. In general, Joëlle Tuerlinckx had made a large part of her personal notes available to me and had given me permission to quote her in order to support my observations.

The third approach was the recording of information in images, using photography and short, thirty-second video sequences, taken with a digital camera. For the most part these sequences capture a gesture - Joëlle knew she had thirty seconds in which to act - and are like small instruction manuals concerning certain procedures, such as drawing a contour, applying colour to a surface or crumpling paper.

All of this raw material extracted from the experience of the artist at work was to enable me to analyse the certificate in greater depth, and establish the basis for the installation guide, that is to say to describe the basic principles that made the work function.

My research time was to be divided in two directions: firstly, in the analysis of the certificate while following the artist at work and secondly, in devising a means to reconstruct the results of the analysis in a form or

model that would serve as a manual for future interpreters.

The participation of the artist in the elaboration of this model was indispensable. A large part of her work questions the notion of the archiving of data and this is why any extension of the work installed in a space is accompanied by documents such as lexicons and inventories. These documents are the object of a particular layout that we adapted to our study. The specific typeface that she uses: 'Courier New', was used again in the guide when information taken directly from her work was included. She gave me much advice as to the management of the layout in the construction of this common model, which served as a first approach to the way objects should be installed in an exhibition space.

The necessity of elaborating this model became obvious to me on my discovery of the documents related to the applications since 1998, at the time I was trying to retrace the history of the work. I was dealing with plans drawn on paper, sometimes freehand without taking into account the proportions of the museum, sometimes on photocopied plans of the museum. These were followed by black and white photographs printed on paper, as well as several inventories of objects that did not correspond to the specific titles recorded in the certificate. Since different people had elaborated them, it took me some time to understand the coherence of these documents. It was only when I reconstructed the information precisely on plans of the museum, according to their proportions and the different photographic points of view, that a virtual projection of the past of the work became possible. This reconstruction is one of the first models I obtained. When the photographs did not render the information entirely, as was the case in the details of the display cases, they were redrawn using software that enabled us to reveal both the contents and their placement in the space.

In general, the reconstruction of the history of '*un ensemble autour de MUR*' was made possible by the fact that Joëlle Tuerlinckx documents each of her installations with "photographic walks". These are series that go from the general view to the detail, and make it possible to reconstruct the contingencies that make up the work. Her photography is particularly elaborate since it is the only means of keeping a record of the circumstances of the installation. Her position in the space and the degree of inclination of the camera framing a detail are precise to the point that, were one to put the images of all her installations end to end, they would have the coherence of

a film montage. These precise rules for the memorization of a space are indispensable. They must be applied in the future for all new interpretations. They were therefore the object of a study in the guide.

After having found a common approach for the visual reconstruction of the history of the work, I tackled the deciphering of the title cartel. This cartel, which is mentioned in the certificate, is one of the keys of each application. It therefore varies from application to application. Joëlle Tuerlinckx indicates the trigger or alibi of each application here, an indispensable aid I will comment on later. The interpreter's intentions appear in the first lines. These lines often contain the titles of the objects that can be found in an inventory assembled by the artist. There are different possibilities for writing these words, playing on their order, associations and typography. Indeed, as they also are transformable and adaptable, taking on different meanings in relation to the context, examples of the way they function can be found in the guide. At the end of each title cartel, the name and profession of the interpreter are mentioned, which can serve as a clue as to the operation of the new application.

The inventory of '*un ensemble autour de ~~MUR~~*' also required a model. This inventory is partially included in the certificate, as an outline of the objects intended to make up the work. It takes the form of a list of terms grouped in series, such as 'BARRES', 'VOLUMES', 'BOULES' etc. At the time it first came to my attention, the list did not correspond to the number of objects stocked in the museum. Some had never been conceived, others had been added in the course of new applications. It was therefore necessary to sort them and, in view of their number, a means had to be found to identify them clearly so we decided to create an inventory in images. Each object was photographed and associated with its title. As we saw earlier with the use of the cartel, the title is one of the degrees of perception of an object in space. It is its mental space. I was able to verify on several occasions that in her work, a thing begins to exist, to be retained, from the instant it attains the possibility of being named. So the title and the image of the object had to be presented as indissociable. This inventory in images is made up of labels to be stuck to the packing boxes (for greater efficiency at the time of installation). These labels are specific to her work. From this point on, for most of her variable installations, the objects were catalogued in the same manner.

Another essential point in the identification of the object is the reproduction

and transformation rights since, in order to make the work evolve by adapting it to the context, certain objects can be transformed. This is not just a detail – these possibilities must be clearly indicated for the person consulting the inventory. It is partly because of these possibilities that the work resists fetishization and conserves its primary functionality. For example, during the 2003 application, thanks to transformation rights, a pad of yellow post-its lent its colour to the walls of the exhibition space. Unfortunately, I do not have time here to say more about the meaning of this adaptation.

The certificate provides us with a few leads concerning the presentation of the objects. We continued to photograph them in the manner of the inventory. It was apparent here that, depending on the context, the same object could be shown on the floor, on a table, on a mobile tray, in a display case etc. To give a more concrete idea of these variations in presentation, after having viewed hundreds of photographs classified in the artist's personal computer or in her slide files, I selected the most explicit views of these presentations. The different exhibition spaces where the views were taken are indicated using the artist's abbreviations. A lexicon lists the abbreviations and provides the details of the references, the dates, and the exhibition titles. These presentations are indications and not examples to be followed to the letter. Ideally, in fact, other modes of presentation adapted to specific situations should be found.

After having assembled, identified and shown examples of the presentation of the objects it was possible to tackle their conservation. The principal problem was to define on what basis the appearance of an object could be judged acceptable or not. In following the conception of the work, I was often lead to notice that an accident could be considered as part of the history of the object. In this case, it was no longer an accident but a particularity, a characteristic of the object. Defining in what way an object is altered is not an easy task, even for Joëlle Tuerlinckx. She does not propose precise rules for restoration, but rather a study of the different cases one by one. Depending on the object, it is possible to use several approaches to restoration, from the classical procedure that takes the reversibility of the intervention into account to the substitution of a copy for an object when it has become too fragile to be exhibited. After having considered the objects one by one, the result was a list of questions that would orient future interventions yet without determining the solutions. As imagination has its limits, we did a few tests by placing copies of objects in an ultraviolet

chamber. These were objects rather than samples so that Joëlle could answer as to the acceptable limits of their appearance. It happened that she changed her mind regarding answers she had given after having seen the results of aging for some of them.

Certain particularly fragile objects, like the slides or the glass plates with words inscribed on them for overhead projectors, deteriorate rapidly with the effects of light and heat. Only copies can be projected. Reproduction rights permit their reproduction. We established a protocol in order to document the aging process of a slide projected over the duration of an exhibition, since the study of the disappearance of the visible is an inherent theme of the work.

The vocabulary proposed by the “*variable media*” sometimes enabled us to find solutions when envisaging the reproduction of certain objects, as was the case for the plates for overhead projection. Because an identical reproduction was too complicated, we took the liberty of “emulating” the object, that is to say, of imitating the original appearance by completely different means, by scanning the words inscribed on the glass plates and printing them on transparent films for projection. The result on projection is identical to the original. For a material aspect close to the original, the plastic film is set on a glass plate, which slows down its deformation in contact with heat. Unfortunately, the film is not durable, but it is very easily reprinted with a standard colour printer. The fragility of this copy makes any confusion with the original work impossible.

Other information can be found in this part on conservation such as the origin of the materials, the manner in which they are assembled, advice on their manipulation and the climatic conditions of their conservation.

The artist created boxes to measure for the packing of the “BARREs”, “TIGEs”, and “bâtonnets” in which the objects are installed according to specific configurations. So these boxes are at once a means of presentation as well as a protection. It is to be noted that, once again it is not easy to distinguish the limits between the work and its conservation, since the questioning of display systems is part of this work. The collaboration between the artist and the museum will have permitted the extension of this questioning to the very details of conservation.

At this stage, what remains to be discussed is the last part, the

experimentation with new scenarios. These experiments were arbitrarily named ‘scenarios’ in order to distinguish them from Joëlle Tuerlinckx’s ‘applications’. They are to be understood as examples proposed by an interpreter.

To approach these scenarios, it was necessary to shift from the study of the objects in their individuality to their association in the space. But what to choose when the space and the objects are overflowing with possibilities as we have attempted to suggest here? For Joëlle Tuerlinckx, the first task was to find an alibi that would trigger an interaction between the work and the space. Here is how we proceeded on a concrete level:

During the summer of 2005, the museum had made a room available for this project. I was thus to be the first interpreter. My choices took into account my experience as an assistant and conservator – suffice to say that any attempt to attain a form of objectivity in the interpretation had to be qualified. In addition, I was not acting alone since I remained in constant dialogue with the artist. Concretely, I worked in relation to themes recurrent in her practice. Some of these themes include the notion of ‘real time’ (temps reel), ‘found on site’, (trouvé sur place), the limit, passage or connections between spaces, variations in the modes of presentation of objects in space, language and colour, the stretching of spaces. Each experiment began with a sort of survey, from the exhibition room to the reserves of the museum, which took into account the situation of the room, its architecture, the type of lighting, the openings, the nature of the floors and the walls, the works presented in the vicinity, materials and objects available in the museum workshops, the context, in other words.

At the time of the preparation of the scenario, Joëlle Tuerlinckx asked me to speak precisely about the context. In this way, she guided me through her methods of investigation of the space. As the conversation proceeded, I eventually noticed a phenomenon that stood out from the rest, the famous alibi she was constantly talking about. According to this alibi, she suggested examples of installations from the past, which could be developed to a greater or lesser extent. With this encounter between a particularity of the current museum space and an example from an exhibition from the past as a basis, I went into the room. I was looking for a prolongation based on objects from *l’ensemble autour de ~~MUR~~* and on objects *trouvés sur place* (found on site) at the museum. I tried to situate them in the space. In general, I tried not to stray from the work, that is to say, to take a liberty of



interpretation that departed from what I had learnt in contact with the artist. I wanted to work according to a norm that was intrinsic to the objects, as a way of investing the space (I won't go into the intentions of these scenarios in detail for lack of time). Thus, for the first scenario, I used one of the objects, the *chaise barrée*, again as a unit to measure the space, which was entirely conceivable thanks to the objects' function as tools. Joëlle Tuerlinckx never works in such a systematic manner but on the part of a conservator, she accepted and understood the procedure. The same was true regarding an adaptation of one of her applications dating from 2002 where I tried to adapt the objects installed in a long, narrow room to another wider, shorter space where the experiment was taking place. I was testing her concept of 'stretching' in the literal sense. There again, even though I was respecting her principles, she would never have acted in the same way. But again, the role of the interpreter, or her field of specialization, renders such manipulations acceptable.

Here is how we proceeded on a concrete level, for the elaboration of the scenarios: at the end of each day, I took photos, short video sequences, as well as notes, that I communicated to Joëlle Tuerlinckx. After discussion, I went back to the space, modified the installation, and so on, until the proposition seemed to us coherent and appropriate to the space. At that point, she came to the site and made the last modifications before validating the installation. These last modifications were essential; without them, she did not consider my intervention as constituting an artwork, but it is probable that, were the interpreter an artist, she would not have to intervene. However, this remains an open question. We carried out five scenarios for *un ensemble autour de MUR*, each of which is, in turn, variable. Each scenario is documented according to the common model, by associating plans, photographs and the inventory of objects used. A text describes the installation process.

In conclusion, these experiments or scenarios are examples of variations. They have not rendered the work autonomous. However, they did contribute to the practical application of the information in the certificate, and then to its development towards a guide, which is an open manual for this variable work. The next step would be to test the use of the guide by a third party and evaluate its usefulness. Ideally Joëlle Tuerlinckx would no longer need to intervene, but, in my opinion, this is still far from being a reality and it is perhaps not a feasible goal. This being said, as the guide was constructed according to a model closely related to the work, it remains

the most concrete testimony to its variability. If, in the future, the museum decides to show one of the old applications, it will be able to reconstitute the parameters of the context. But ideally, for the person willing to take the time to go through the guide, it should be possible to extrapolate a few future applications, so that the work continues to never stop starting.