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**REFLECTIONS ON A  
BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH  
TO CONTEMPORARY ART  
CONSERVATION**

**Keywords:** conservation, contemporary art, cultural biography, installation art, trajectory

**ABSTRACT**

Rather than preserving original objects, the conservation of contemporary art should be thought of as managing change. This raises the question of how to theoretically capture the variability of the work without losing the sense of its artistic identity. The researchers participating in the interdisciplinary project *New strategies in the conservation of contemporary art* propose to use a biographical approach to investigate and compare the histories of artworks, both before and after they enter museum collections. In this paper the authors claim that not only do decisive turning points in an artwork's life occur at other moments than those conventionally recognised, but moreover, that they are made up of various and diverging timelines, to be mapped as a river's trajectory.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Au lieu de préserver les objets d'origine, la conservation-restauration de l'art contemporain doit être pensée comme la gestion du changement. Ceci soulève la question de l'évaluation théorique de la variabilité de l'œuvre sans perdre de vue le sens de son identité artistique. Les chercheurs participant au projet interdisciplinaire *Nouvelles stratégies de conservation-restauration de l'art contemporain* proposent d'employer une approche biographique pour étudier et comparer les histoires des œuvres d'art, à la fois avant et après leur admission dans les collections de musée. Dans cet article, les auteurs avancent que non seulement des tournants décisifs dans la vie d'une œuvre surviennent à d'autres moments que ceux conventionnellement admis, mais surtout que ces aléas épousent des chronologies variées et diver-

**MANAGING CHANGE**

When we think of the conservation of artworks in museums, the conventional, ideal-typical picture is that of an object being acquired and from that moment onwards preserved in the condition in which it entered the museum. It is assumed that the object as a whole is kept intact, and that when it is not on display, it is placed on 'stand by', with no changes taking place in its condition. Of course, everybody knows that in actual practice this is seldom the case, but we should strive to approach this ideal course as closely as possible. However, even as an ideal, this standard picture has become questionable. The reasons are very well summarised by Jill Sterrett (Getty Conservation Institute 2009) in a conversation about ethical dilemmas in contemporary art conservation organised by The Getty Conservation Institute.

Conventional thinking holds that in order to keep objects for future generations, we study the materials, put them in dark storage, and monitor the environment. And that, we hope, will sustain an object's life for hundreds of years. But what we've come up against with art made in the last fifty years – particularly installation-based art – is that if we do something like that, then it is a sure sign of its demise. (Getty Conservation Institute 2009)

What are being stored are not artworks, but parts of artworks. Some of these parts consist of sophisticated technological elements, like videotapes, which, as Sterrett observes, have to be transferred to a current format every seven or ten years in order to remain playable. Other parts might be organic and might undergo processes of alteration and decay, leading to their disposal and replacement, whereas even more durable materials, like plastics, eventually degrade. In any case, these parts not only have to be re-installed to become artworks again; their preservation *depends*, as Sterrett observes further, on re-installation and display. But re-installation inevitably comes with change. Some elements have to be transferred, others have to be remade or to be bought again; in all cases the whole has to be re-assembled and often to be re-configured, usually in a different space than its first place of exhibition. To borrow a distinction made in the same discussion, rather than 'preserving objects' conservators are 'managing change' – sometimes with the artists around, but very often without them.

gentes pouvant être enregistrées comme le tracé d'un fleuve.

## RESUMEN

En lugar de preservar objetos originales, la conservación del arte contemporáneo debería considerarse como una gestión del cambio. Surge entonces la pregunta sobre cómo capturar teóricamente la variabilidad del trabajo sin perder el sentido de su identidad artística. Los investigadores que participan en el proyecto interdisciplinario *New strategies in the conservation of contemporary art* (Nuevas estrategias en la conservación de arte contemporáneo) propusieron usar un enfoque biográfico para investigar y comparar las historias de las obras de arte, tanto antes como después de ser incorporadas a colecciones de museos. En este artículo los autores afirman que los puntos decisivos de inflexión de la vida de las obras de arte pueden tener lugar en momentos diferentes a los ya reconocidos convencionalmente, y además están conformados por secuencias cronológicas diferentes y divergentes, y se pueden mapear del mismo modo que la trayectoria de un río.

The research project *New strategies in the conservation of contemporary art* aims to develop a deeper understanding of what happens with contemporary artworks after they have entered a museum collection. Building on the large body of research already done in the professional field and on their own empirical investigations, the researchers of the project – of whom three have a background as conservation professionals and have been actively involved in the conservation of the works they investigate – try to construct a theoretical framework for analysing and comparing conservation strategies and evaluating their consequences for the artworks involved. The following reflections contain a first report of the project members' collective work-in-progress.<sup>1</sup>

## BETWEEN CONCEPT AND OBJECT

A very basic question initiating this discussion is *what* exactly is being conserved and how to understand this 'what' in a way that articulates both the work's artistic identity and its inherent variability. A recurring problem, by now quite familiar to conservation practitioners and theorists, is how to balance a work's material and conceptual dimensions. Joseph Kosuth's *Glass (one and three)*, investigated by Sanneke Stigter, provides a clear example of a work that changed conceptually by *not* changing physically. *Glass (one and three)* is one of Kosuth's 'proto-investigations', like *One and three chairs*, likewise dated 1965. It consists of a sheet of glass leaning against the wall, a life-size photograph of the same glass and an enlarged photograph of the dictionary definition of the Dutch word 'glas'. The work was first realised in the Antwerp apartment of its first owner Geertjan Visser in 1976; it was given on loan to the Kröller-Müller Museum in 1979 and officially acquired by the museum in 1995. Until 2002, it was always exhibited in its 1976 version, that is, with the original photograph showing the glass sheet standing on the tiled floor of Visser's apartment. As a consequence of being displayed against a different backdrop in a new location, the site-related aspect of the first installation was lost, undoing what Paula van den Bosch called 'the pleasing effect of infinity' or 'Droste effect' (Droste cocoa tins show a nurse carrying a tray with a tin of Droste cocoa, showing a nurse carrying a tray,... and so ad infinitum) (Stigter 2010, 21).

In this case, preserving the authentic objects meant losing the suggestion of transparency evoked by having the photograph reproduce the actual location of the installation, which was characteristic for the work's conceptual and aesthetic integrity.<sup>2</sup> Vice versa, it can be argued that when in 2002 the Stedelijk Museum borrowed *Glass (one and three)* for the exhibition *Conceptual Art in the Netherlands and Belgium 1965-1975* and replaced the original photograph by one showing the glass situated on the museum's parquet floor, this physical alteration brought about the recovery of its previous conceptual potential. As Stigter states,

... to freeze an artwork in time could harm the true nature of art that is intended to change or that is immaterial in nature in itself. Conceptual

art, time-based art, installations, performance and interactive art are in need of conservation strategies that manage change and allow progression when required. (Stigter 2010, 7)

In the case of *Glass (one and three)*, progression could mean: re-executing the photograph each time the work is shown in a new location.

### THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

To account for the variability of works like these, yet without abandoning the normative awareness of the need to respect their artistic integrity, *New strategies* has adopted the idea of artworks having *biographies*. Following the lines set out by the cultural anthropology of things and the study of material culture (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Merrill 1998, Gosden and Marshall 1999, Hoskins 2006, Latour and Lowe 2008), the heuristic model of the cultural biography has been adopted as a framework for the description and comparison of the cases studied. The central idea of the biographical approach is that the meaning of an object and the effects it has on people and events may change during its existence, due to changes in its physical state, use, and social, cultural and historical context. The concept of the biography enables us to describe – and thereby construct – the artworks’ ‘lives’ as individual trajectories that nevertheless may show similar phases and patterns of change.

There are some theoretical problems that will need to be considered. First, the biographical approach implies the metaphorical attribution of ‘life’ to an artwork, which may seem rather unscientific. However, as conservators themselves frequently use the analogy for living organisms to indicate the intangible qualities without which a work would lose its artistic significance, it was chosen to hold on to this analogy – it keeps the awareness of the normative dimension of conservation practice present in our heuristic framework. A second complicating factor is that the concept of a biography suggests an organic or functional whole possessing a singular identity – a suggestion challenged by the art practices under investigation. This problem will be looked at again later.

### NOTES ON BIOGRAPHICAL STAGES

The point that needs to be made on the basis of our work so far is that the decisive moments in the lives of the works studied do not neatly coincide with what is conventionally recognised as such. As Stigter remarks (Stigter 2010, 7):

The moment the artwork leaves the artist’s studio and the moment it enters a collection are significant marks in time that are generally used as a touchstone for decision-making in traditional art conservation. In contemporary art conservation, however, there can be more moments and situations which define the artwork just as well, creating a shift

in focus with regard to the aim of conservation practice: ensuring the artwork's progression in time rather than its conservation.

Looking at the cases biographically and figuring out typical 'phases' and moments of transition, it can be seen that a work's biography not always 'starts' at a single moment in time (leaving the studio) and that the moment of entering a collection does not always mark the last of its biographical phases. As Stigter's account shows, 'leaving the studio' is an inadequate description of *Glass (one and three)*'s 'birth', as the concept was around long before the work's first material manifestation, not in the artist's studio but in the new owner's apartment in 1976. It also shows that after musealisation, a work may lose parts or characteristics, but also acquire new ones. The photograph made by the Stedelijk Museum was given to the Kröller-Müller where it is now kept in storage as an 'inactive part' of the installation (Stigter 2010, 22). More photographs were added in successive re-installations by the Kröller-Müller following a comparable strategy.

Works may have multiple lines of development, as is demonstrated by another one of our cases, *Drifting Producers* (2003–2005), by the South-Korean collective flyingCity. Tatja Scholte describes how the urban research project *Drifting Producers* before taking the form of an installation (acquired by the Van Abbemuseum in 2005) had its 'incubation phase' in a series of locally based community-and-art activities. The project started with participatory workshops and performances in which the rapid urban development of Seoul in the 21st century was the topic of playful research. In 2005, when *Drifting Producers* entered the international art circuit and was shown in Kassel and at the Istanbul Biennial, however, it had become a complex installation work of art. The participatory events were from then on separated from the work (the last *Drifting Producers*' workshop was held in Guangzhou 2006), and the installation no longer contained the models of utopian cities made by children and students that had been exhibited in its inaugural exhibitions in Seoul. Instead, a large model and a variety of components made by the artists show physical evidence of the project in the installation *Drifting Producers*. What is interesting in this case, is that this change of context from Seoul to the Western art world seems to have constituted a more decisive moment in the biography than its subsequent entrance into a museum collection. After its acquisition, the Van Abbemuseum exhibited the work once (during the exhibition PlugIn in 2006), but is now exploring ways in which the relationship with the original context of the project can be re-established by expanding the installation. The museum is thinking of adding 'new' components to the work, like objects which the artists consider still to be part of the project: a publication, lectures given by the artists and workshops organised in Eindhoven.

This new development demonstrates that a work does not necessarily stop changing when it enters a museum collection. Here, it is the museum that wishes to re-establish a previous element of the work, but also artists

sometimes continue altering the work, as in the case of Nam June Paik's *Noah's Ark*, described by Hanna Hölling (Hölling 2010). When *Noah's Ark* was first exhibited in the White House Gallery in Hamburg in 1989, it consisted of a huge wooden vessel (ca. 3.5 m long by 1.5 m wide); a base decorated with black and white photographs, 29 TV sets placed at the base of the boat and on the deck, eight papier maché animals and a colourful banner. The Zentrum für Kunst- und Medientechnologie acquired *Noah's Ark* shortly after this first exhibition. In 1991, it was presented at the *Multimediale 2* in Karlsruhe. The banner had disappeared, the vessel's hull had been decorated by Paik, and the position of the animals had shifted slightly. When it was presented again in Barcelona at the Fundació Joan Miro in 1992, several pot plants were placed at the base according to Paik's wishes. Although no photographs of this installation remain, from that moment onwards plants have appeared at every successive re-installation.

One would suppose that changes stop when the artist is no longer around, but that isn't always the case either. Nam June Paik died in 2006. In 2008, the work was displayed in the exhibition *Nam June Paik. Artworks from the ZKM Collection*. The work contained forty plants of different types in white flower pots, no papier maché animals and the banner again was lacking. When the exhibition was over, the inner structure of the vessel was modified in such a way that the vessel can be taken apart into two separate elements and a base without dismantling the planking. This reconstruction was performed by Paik's assistant Jochen Saueracker with ZKM's technical staff.

While tracing the biography of the *Ark*, Hölling draws a clear line between the 'life' of the work before its rediscovery and its adaptation by the museum in 2008 and its afterlife. She concludes that what happened finally was its musealisation: the *Ark* had to be adapted to satisfy museum requirements, to be displayed, stored and shipped. The occasion bringing about the incisive reconstruction was its re-installation after 17 years of storage. 'Earlier, the *Ark* was just an installation like many other stored artefacts, lurking in a silent part of a museum store and awaiting rediscovery. As in many other cases of installation art, its re-discovery brought along simultaneous modification, adaptation, and change' (Hölling 2010, 14). This suggests that it might be possible to reverse our perspective regarding the work's continuous existence as the standard, and threats or interruptions of this continuity as the exception. The case studies indicate that the default condition of many contemporary artworks is non-existence or at best a kind of 'half life' or 'slumber' from which they only now and then re-emerge as artworks; and that a major watershed in the life of those artworks that are being collected by museums is not their acquisition, but their re-installation after (often long) periods of storage. This brings us back to Jill Sterrett (Getty Conservation Institute 2009), who warned that storing an artwork for long periods of time, however safely, will be detrimental to its continuation:

Why? Because, we actually have to test our knowledge of installing these pieces. They're only parts in storage until we put them together. They become the art according to a set of instructions that we get from the artist. If you put the work in storage and don't display it for ten years, you've diminished your ability to keep it because you might not be able to install it properly. (Getty Conservation Institute 2009)

## BIOGRAPHIES AND TRAJECTORIES

There is another lesson to be drawn from the *Ark*'s life-story: that is that biographies may be written on different levels. The history is not only associated with the whole; its components – the vessel, the TV sets, the animals, the plants – have their own, separate stories that follow different timelines and manifest different dynamics. To grasp this composite nature of contemporary artworks, we could profit from Bruno Latour's and Adam Lowe's (2008) notion of the work as a 'trajectory'. Rather than searching obsessively for a supposed original as a distinct and privileged entity divorced from its reproductions, we should – according to Latour and Lowe – account for 'the whole assemblage made up of one – or several – original(s) *together with* the retinue of its continually re-written biography' (Latour and Lowe 2008, 3).

A given work of art should be compared not to any isolated locus but to a river's catchment, complete with its estuaries, its many tributaries, its dramatic rapids, its many meanders and of course with its several hidden sources.

To give a name to this catchment area, we will use the word *trajectory* (Latour and Lowe 2008, 3, 4).

The image of the work as a catchment area or trajectory allows for a differentiated timeline: 'Each of the components that together comprise what we mean by a true original begin travelling at different speeds along the trajectory and begin to map out what we have called the catchment area of a work of art' (Latour and Lowe 2008, 11).<sup>3</sup> Rather than using the concepts as alternatives, the idea is to model the biography of a work as a whole in a way similar to how Latour and Lowe envision its trajectory, as consisting of various singular interweaving partial biographies with different beginnings, itineraries, dynamics and endings. In this way, the biographical approach is enriched with a sense of complexity and multiplicity, without losing the normative awareness implied in the notion of the work's 'life'.

## CONCLUSION

The notion of biography enables us to identify and compare stages and turning points in artworks' lives. These comparisons indicate that often very important changes occur after a work's acquisition by a museum, and may be initiated by the artist but also by the work's caretakers, in particular after long periods of storage. Conservation decisions inevitably affect the course of a work's development and are therefore

formative for its biography, which needs to be re-written time and again. In our view, writing a work's biography (which is not a neutral act but incorporates the standpoint of the writer) may be considered to be part of conserving the work. Not only because examination of decisions taken in the past and the work's exhibition history underlies sound decisions in the present, but also because each new chapter added today makes decisions transparent for conservators in the future. In fact, the importance of (re-)constructing a work's biography is not an entirely new strand in other fields of conservation (such as archaeology or ethnography). The ideal aim of this article is to open up a dialogue between those other areas and contemporary art conservation in order to explore possibilities of developing a shared methodology in writing biographies for conservation ends.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *New strategies* is a collaboration between the Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands (RCE), Maastricht University (UM) and the University of Amsterdam (UvA), with financial support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Participating researchers are: Deborah Cherry (UvA), Hanna Hölling (UvA), IJsbrand Hummelen (RCE), Vivian van Saaze (UM), Tatja Scholte (RCE), Sanneke Stigter (UvA/Kröller-Müller Museum) and Renée van de Vall (UM). <http://www.newstrategiesinconservation.org/>.
- <sup>2</sup> For the notions of conceptual and aesthetic integrity see Laurenson 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> There is a difference in how Appadurai and Latour use the word trajectory: for Appadurai objects *have* (or are involved in) trajectories, for Latour they *are* (or should be described as) trajectories.

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