

Working Group Registration and Documentation, Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art  
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New registration models suited to modern and contemporary art\*

In contemporary art, both the use of materials and the production techniques are extremely diverse. Artists may employ any material, varying from stone and metal to plastics and highly transitory biological matter – such as the fruits on a glass table by Mario Merz. Works may be composed with objects the artist has made, but also with manufactured 'ready-mades' or parts commissioned and produced by others. Thus, the importance or function of the maker's hand differs from work to work.

To an increasing extent, artists are giving individual and different meanings to the materials and techniques they use. Depending on these meanings and the artists' intentions, the material may or may not have to be kept in its original state: sometimes the process of ageing, for example, is an integral part of the art work. The variety of materials, techniques and meanings implies that approaches to conservation and restoration also differ from work to work. The same goes for installation, handling and storage. Therefore, we have to decide for every single art work what is the best way to deal with it.

When discussing the ten pilot objects in the Conservation of Modern Art project, we found that in actual practice reliable and detailed information on these subjects is rather patchy or hard to find. The inventory cards and the documentation files did not supply sufficient data, so we were far from able to answer all the questions about materials and techniques, the artists' intentions, their views on the restoration of their work, and so on. With Tony Cragg's *One Space, Four Places* for instance:

- information about the origin of the material was missing – in fact there was no detailed record of the material at all,
- no detailed photographs of the work were available,
- the photographs we did have were not dated, which made it difficult to determine to what extent the work's condition had declined or whether components had already disappeared completely,
- there were no instructions from Cragg regarding the installation of the work,
- information about past restorations was scant and Cragg's own views on the preservation of his work were unknown.

Yet, all this information is of vital importance for reaching a proper diagnosis and making the right decisions for preservation measures. Tracking it down was a time-consuming and tedious job; we could have saved much time if as much information as possible had been gathered and recorded at the moment the work was acquired.

### **Two registration models**

It became clear that all the information obtained during the project should be carefully stored for future use. To this purpose, a registration model was needed in which the work of art could be described and documented in detail. Existing registration models were studied for workability, but these offered little room for recording 'unconventional' data. We did know the interesting and highly advanced model that was especially developed for sculpture in the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt by Erich Gantzert-Castrillo. This, however, was very unwieldy – partly because the material is described in a system of multiple choice and the list of materials used in contemporary sculpture is practically endless. We decided that a system of open questions, being more compact and clear, would be better suited for recording the information.

Within the project, a working group for Registration and Documentation was set up to design a new model – a model consistent with the one for decision-making which was being developed in parallel. On the basis of the investigation of the ten pilot objects, the working group took stock of the various kinds of information to be registered. The outcome was a combination of two registration models: one for data registration and one, entirely new, for condition registration.

The model for data registration can be used for various purposes by various departments in the museum. It can easily be converted to an electronic database and adapted to different systems. The model contains the customary fields for the registration of art works, supplemented here and there by an observation field in which reporters can list their sources, for instance. New features are:

- Description of materials and techniques: recorded are the origin of the material and its treatment and function, whether parts are prefabricated or recycled, whether there are intangible aspects

such as movement or sound, who is the maker of the various parts (artist, assistant or production company), where the work was constructed, whether spare parts are available.

- Description of the work's presentation and installation: this is linked to information on the artist's intention, which should guarantee the desired 'effect'. In addition, references can be made to information about past presentations – thus creating a sort of installation history.
- Description of the work's meaning: this may include information on the artist's intentions from literature or from interviews with the artist himself/herself, possibly made when the work was purchased.
- Description of the work's significance: its meaning within the context of art history and its importance within both the artist's oeuvre and the museum's collection.
- The formulation of ethical guidelines for conservation: the do's and don'ts in the light of the work's significance. This, in fact, contains the conclusions from the condition registration and the decision-making model.

The model for condition registration serves to determine the work's condition and to state conservation options. The work's current condition and its original state are compared. Along with the results of literary and material research and information from the artist, they form the basis of any proposals for conservation or restoration. The eventual conservation or restoration measures and recommendations for passive conservation can also be recorded here.

Thus, apart from its registrative function, the model can also be viewed as a guide indicating the entire route from defining the work's condition through to accounting for its conservation. This model does not seem to be as easily convertible to an electronic database as the data registration model: it contains extensive texts and other means of documentation such as photographs, video and sound tapes, plan drawings, product information and reference items. A good solution for computerisation might be to make the information accessible on two levels: first, in keywords, the instructions and then, for the user who wants or needs more, the full details available via a kind of 'clicking' or 'hypertext' system.

Interpreting the information and translating it into conservation proposals is a matter on which the conservator and the curator together decide. Finally, the data on treatment, conservation, transport, storage and exhibition history contained in the condition registration are used to help fill in keywords in corresponding fields of the data registration – thus, the two models are connected (see the survey on page 165).

### **Practical experience**

As a curator in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, I took part in the Conservation of Modern Art project because we had to deal with similar registration problems. We have no permanent conservator on staff but work with several freelancers, so the conservation and restoration of the collection falls under the curator's responsibility. The museum has a relatively small collection – about 2,500 inventory items – of paintings, works on paper, sculptures and installations from the twentieth century. It turned out that the documentation for the sculptures and installations was inadequate for properly setting up complex installations, or for making well-considered, sound decisions regarding active and passive conservation. Therefore, the museum decided a few years ago to develop a new data registration model that could accommodate more information.

Our new model was developed in actual museum practice, although gradually our findings were integrated with those of the working group for Registration and Documentation. Now, the project's data registration model is very similar to ours. All new acquisitions are documented with the help of the new model. We are working backwards now to document the rest of the collection. The condition registration model developed by the working group is being used in the consultations between curator and conservator on the conservation of our sculptures, and I must say that we are very enthusiastic about it.

### **A growing awareness**

For making the right decisions regarding conservation, restoration, exhibiting work, transport and storage, a careful documentation of art is very important. The quality of the documentation determines the quality of the decision, which in turn determines the quality of the preservation of the work for years to come. In actual practice it is not always possible to obtain all the necessary information, there is not enough time to record all the data and there are always new questions arising later on anyway, but it is the growing awareness that counts. By using these models, one becomes aware of how vital certain information is – both now and in the future. Even if this information is not available at the

moment, at least there will be a central place to store it as soon as it does become available. And so, it can be accessed by everyone else in the museum.

Regarding this growing awareness, it is not only contemporary sculpture that changes, the way in which museums and artists deal with it changes too. This can be seen from the following example. A few months ago, the Van Abbemuseum displayed Suchan Kinoshita's work *Show*. After the exhibition, we spoke with her about the possibility of purchasing this work. Naturally we wondered how to display the work without her direct participation, how to preserve it and whether parts could be replaced. Kinoshita was immediately prepared to discuss this with us and proposed writing a sort of 'musical score' in which she would write down exactly how the work is to be installed and 'performed', who can take what liberties, and who has what obligations. She also proposed the appointment of three 'godmothers' who would stand by and assist the museum in the event of installation or maintenance problems. The godmothers are also responsible for their own future successors.

This is an interesting proposal, completely in line with the spirit of the work itself and, as it were, a part of it. Only few art works however are blessed with a special godmother. If we want to enable future generations to take maximum pleasure from the art works of our age, then we now have to record as much information as possible. For proper management and maintenance, proper documentation is a necessity.

### **A survey of the registration models**

In the Conservation of Modern Art project, the models for data registration and condition registration were developed and tested in parallel to the investigation of the ten pilot objects. Apart from traditional records of a work's condition, treatment and conservation, a new aspect of the model for condition registration is that it includes evaluation and decision-making points.

The two models are interrelated: for determining an art work's condition, the data registration has to supply the necessary information on its original situation and history, and on the materials and techniques used, while directions for the work's preservation in the data registration rely on the information found in the model for condition registration.

Both models are also dynamic in that after each new research result and treatment the information is updated. All data on loans, exhibitions, insurance value, photography and suchlike, which are augmented and modified over time, should be recorded and kept as historical reference.

For the data registration, each museum will have to make its own arrangements, depending on their individual situation, as to who is to complete which of the various fields – the curator, conservator, storage handler, registrar or anyone else. With the condition registration, it is in principle the conservator who, in consultation with the curator, completes the forms.

### **Model for data registration**

This model comprises the following fields:

#### **1. Identification**

This includes the art work's meaning which is a record of the artist's intended statement with the work – even though this may be hard to formulate at times. Further study on the subject is needed, especially on that of interviewing the artist about his/her work. Many relevant data are retrieved this way: the project showed clearly that, if possible, the artist should always be interviewed.

For reasons of consistency, areas for recording the work's original meaning have also been included under the headings of Description, Production, and Presentation/Installation (resp. 3, 4 and 5).

#### **2. Location**

#### **3. Description**

#### **4. Production**

Under the headings of 3 and 4, specific fields for data on materials and techniques of three-dimensional art are included. Thus, the traditional arrangement in large groups of materials and types of work has been replaced by open fields. Moreover, data on prefab or re-used parts, the producer (the artist himself/herself, his/her assistant or some company) and non-material aspects such as motion and sound also have to be recorded. For accountable decision making on conservation, these proved to be indispensable.

#### **5. Handling the object**

#### **6. Presentation/Installation**

This includes information on the artists' intentions with the installation of their work and its effect on the viewer.

#### **7. Literature & Correspondence**

#### **8. The Artist**

## 9. Acquisition

### **Model for condition registration**

For the registration of a work's condition, the model comprises five types of documentation which correspond with the subsequent stages in the decision-making model:

#### 1. Diagnosis

Here, the discrepancy between the art work's current condition and the original state (thus directly depending on the data registration of original materials and techniques) is defined. The investigation of the ten pilot objects showed that with contemporary art works the use of materials and the production techniques differ essentially from those of traditional art. Therefore, modern art offers scope for unorthodox ways of restoration, such as the replacement of parts.

The discrepancy between a work's current condition and its recorded original state and intention is evaluated; on the basis of this evaluation, conservation options are listed and selected.

#### 2. Conservation options

A range of options are investigated for their practicality, ethical/aesthetical admissibility and so on. In the project, this was the stage in which various external experts were consulted.

#### 3. Propositions

In the end, choices have to be made; propositions are formulated accordingly.

#### 4. Treatment Reports

As usual with conservation and restoration.

#### 5. Preventive conservation advice/minimum conservation needs

An important record, resulting in instructions for various museum assistants.

The models can be further developed by:

- working out the item 'interview with the artist',
- testing the model for condition registration on larger groups of objects,
- designing a thesaurus of modern materials.

\* This article and the models have been published in:

Y. Hummelen en D. Sillé (ed.), *Modern Art: Who Cares? An interdisciplinary research project and an international symposium on the conservation of modern and contemporary art*

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