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Title: Artists' interviews and their use in conservation; reflections on issues and practices

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Abstract: Artists' interviews are widely used in the conservation of contemporary art. Best practice is detailed in recent publications, conferences and workshops, however, there is little information on how to analyse the data collected, and the issues related to the dissemination and future access to the content. This article examines various techniques of analysis appropriated from qualitative research in the social sciences, and relates them to the intended uses of interviews in conservation. Drawing on a case study that involved interaction with an artist over several years, including interviews and informal conversations, this article argues that a conservators' specific skills set has the capacity to interpret the findings and to understand the creative processes. It also highlights the importance of reflexivity and the public circulation of this interpretation, which is essential for the development of a sustainable practice of artists' interviews in conservation.

Keywords: artists' interviews, significance, interpretation, dissemination.

Recently, Mirka Mora (b.1928), the Melbourne artist who has been the focus of a three year study, commented with a big smile while discussing a technical point: 'You know my work better than I do now!' We continued the conversation but the words lingered, leaving a mixed feeling of pleasure and discomfort. There was the satisfaction that the research was recognized by the person who was its subject, but also an uncomfortable realization that it may have over-reached its goals in the investigation of Mora's techniques and materials.

This comment and the context within which it occurred prompted me to reflect on the place of artists' interviews in conservation and its practice. Although there is now

considerable literature on the benefits of interviewing living artists for the conservation of their oeuvre, such as the writings of Mancusi-Ungaro (2005), Wharton (2006) and Beerkens, t'Hoen, Hummelen, van Saaze, Scholte & Stigter (2012), and more conservators are being trained to use this method, there is much less information about the analysis of the collected data and the circulation of the findings within the professional field. In this article, the issue of disseminating information and its links to the ethics of interviewing are examined. The paper aims to map out the main issues encountered by conservators when they engage in interviewing artists professionally, and the strategies that are implemented in various institutions to address them. This includes a rethinking of the absolute reliability of the artist's interview, and proposed changes to the terminology relating to artist's intent. This reflection is shaped by a long-term relationship with an artist and a series of recent meetings with professionals from the Getty Conservation Institute (Los Angeles), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), both in Washington, who are well-known for their practice of artists' interviews.

Brief history of the practice

Whether the ultimate goal is to conserve a specific work of art or to undertake a detailed study of a living artist's entire oeuvre, interviews are a key tool in the conservation of contemporary art. As noted by Beerkens et al., 'it is impossible to imagine our contemporary art world without the artist interview … [a] fascinating new tool in conservation' (Beerkens et al. 2012, p.9). The practice is sometimes extended to the artist's circle, both professional (such as assistants and dealers), and private (such as spouses and partners, children and friends). The current method of interviewing used by conservators was modelled on the example of journalists and art historians, who have a long practice of interviewing sources. This tradition was extended by conservators to include the techniques used in the creation of works of art, information that is essential to undertake conservation activities. The emergence of artist's' interviews flags a shift in conservation practice from object-based to people-based research, as described in detail in the writings of Munoz Vinas such as *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (2005), and implied by the inclusion of participatory methods inspired by oral history, ethnography and social sciences. To build knowledge and assist in decision-making with regard to works of art,

conservators commonly seek the opinions of the creators, as well as those of the public, including multiple stakeholders and users in the case of living heritage.

This curiosity in technical knowledge is not new. From 1939, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam arranged for a questionnaire to be sent to the artists whose works had been purchased by the institution (Beerkens 2012). The ARTnews series of articles, published in the *American Journal of Visual Art Practice* from 1953 to 1958, aimed 'to understand what and how, but also why' (Whiteley 2007). These examples highlight the long term interest in understanding the creative process and its appreciation. What is innovative is the decision to integrate interviews in a conservator's toolkit. This was demonstrated in Carol Mancusi-Ungaro's establishment of the 'Artists Documentation Program' (ADP) in 1991 at the Menil Foundation in Texas. The program now exists as a collaboration between the Menil Foundation, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Centre for the Technical Study of Modern Art, at Harvard Art Museums. It is accessible to conservation professionals, and the current program provides a wealth of knowledge through its filmed interviews of contemporary artists talking about their working processes and their preservation priorities. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro's documentation of interviewing techniques (2005 & 2011) as well as the guidelines for artists' interviews devised by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), are models now widely used in the profession (ICN 1999, INCCA 2002).

Benefits

What do conservators gain from an artist's interview? There are many answers to this question. To a certain extent, materials can be identified through analysis regardless of the presence of the artist. The benefits of an interview therefore lie in the lived experience, the information that can only be collected during the artist's lifetime. Since materials on their own do not always say much, interviews not only document the materials' identity and significance to the best of the artist's knowledge or memory, but also the artist's specific modes of making, the idiosyncratic ways in which they use these materials or appropriate well known techniques by changing some elements.

The interview also documents the choices made by artists to achieve various shapes, surfaces or textures, and explains their importance. In short, interviews record the meanings ascribed to the materials by the artist in order to achieve the sensory effects that determine the character of the work of art. Lastly, they record the artist's attitude towards change and how best to manage it. Change is a fluctuating concept which is particularly prevalent in contemporary art; addressing the effects of degradation and damage, and determining what is acceptable in regard to a work's significance is an essential tenet in conservation, and requires the engagement of artists, as has been thoroughly discussed by Mancusi-Ungaro in the conference *Modern Art: who cares?* in 2005.

Moreover, interviews record the contemporary perception of works of art, and the contextual information associated with them that might be blurred or concealed with time, which in turn puts them at risk of 'loss of personal narrative knowledge' (Michalski 2005). This risk is particularly pertinent at various points in time, are specific to each work and each artist, and mark the transition between contemporary and historical. This knowledge informs conservation in the present and future because it enables a good understanding of the appearance of works of art, and of the subsequent public reactions that equally shape their historical perception.

The artist's interview is also the opportunity to locate a work of art's materiality within a context. Through discussions with an artist, the reasons why particular materials are used at certain periods by individuals or groups become clearer, together with the meaning these materials or making processes carry. The interview therefore allows the conservator and the artist to uncover together the various layers of significance carried by the work's materiality and its social, historical or artistic links, which in turn informs decision-making in terms of conservation.

Processes can sometimes be as interesting as content. The extend of and how to share authority over conservation decisions is a constant dilemma in the field, starting with the process of interviewing artists and followed by the decision regarding the best way to integrate the information collected (Sloggett 2009). While the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) shifts authority entirely to the Native artists, calling the consultation process a 'one way talk', most contemporary art institutions prefer a

shared authority, with input from both parties. Glenn Wharton, a former conservator of time-based media at the Museum of Modern Art, and Clinical Associate Professor at New York University, has described artists' interviews as 'guided conversations, where you are the guide' (McCoy 2009) which leads to co-produced knowledge. For example, installation works are often produced through shared authorship with numerous protagonists within the museum (Wharton 2014). The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) has recently inaugurated a new collection centre dedicated to collaborative work with artists, which includes looking closely at works of art via discussions, round tables and the interpretation of works in a joint capacity (Sterrett 2014).

A conservator's and art historian's perspective

By interviewing an artist, the opportunity arises for conservators to use their specific disciplinary strengths to provide a different reading of the artist's oeuvre. The traditional mode of visitor interaction with a work of art in a gallery is visual, although increasingly this can be combined with a number of sound-based and digital modes of interpretation. Often, the materials employed in the work of art are only briefly mentioned, sometimes inaccurately, on exhibitions labels and in catalogues entries, while the techniques of making rarely get mentioned at all. Conservators however have a different approach. They aim to understand how the work is made, what the material is and the way it has been prepared, treated, manipulated and materially transformed. Conservators tend to recreate the stages of making conceptually, in order to gain a better understanding of the final work of art, how it conveys meaning and how it can best be conserved through time.

This depth-to-surface approach, which characterises the conservation profession, is based on a sound knowledge of materials and often resonates strongly with those artists who physically engage with materials to create works of art. A conservator interviewing an artist on this topic can create a sense of complicity around the act of making things, which helps uncover further details of the creative processes. By shifting the focus to the effort that preceded and enabled the final state of the work of art, these researches contribute to the knowledge base about an artist. According to social anthropologist, Tim Ingold, the emphasis on finished artefacts impedes our understanding of the social and cultural life within its materiality (Ingold 2012). For him,

material culture involves looking at making things as a practice of storytelling, where the form of a thing emerges from the process itself;

> Objects crystallize out from the fluxes of materials and transformations. At this point, materials appear to vanish, swallowed up by the very objects to which they have given birth … in reality of course the materials are still there and continue to mingle as they have always done, forever threatening the things they comprise with dissolution or even 'dematerialization' (Ingold 2007, p. 9).

How often is the conservator's predicament expressed in such poetic terms? A conservator's approach to materials is connected to an artist's approach, with a focus on the behaviour of materials, both independently and within a composite object. However, Ingold observes that artists do not articulate the *properties* of materials, for instance breakability, malleability, hydrophilic affinity, but instead identify their *qualities*, which are highly subjective, such as stoniness, perceived or real solidity, fluidity, or softness (Ingold 2007, p. 13). The relationship between artists and their materials is very often intense, and remains in continual flux over time and therefore is highly significant in the understanding of an entire career. Materials are the means by which the artists express themselves, not unlike words for a writer. Materials are reinvented every time an artist uses them, and the manner of working a material is highly personal for each artist. These choices and decisions may reveal much about the artists' inspirations, aesthetic intentions, and their broader links to the socio-historical context.

Art in the making

A conversation between a conservator and an artist is a privileged exchange that can reveal the hidden voices and meanings of materials and processes. Using the conservator's eye to read an artist's oeuvre in their presence is like travelling together from the materials to the finished works. It adds a different perspective to the critical analysis of the art, uncovering layers of meaning that may be essential for future conservation as well as the current interpretation of the work. Furthermore, a description of the creative process may be of interest to a broader audience, allowing an appreciation of the artists' humanity and of the efforts involved in the works' creation. An interview can also result in the precise identification of materials being edited out because of confidentiality agreements. For example, an artist can make a reference to 'paint' rather than 'acrylic paint' or 'oil paint', or to a 'preparation'

without providing its detailed composition. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's website has many heavily edited interviews with artists on open access, where specific materials are not mentioned, while the NMAI featured for a time a website podcast about the yearly interventive care of one of the collection's sculptures, done in collaboration with the artist, Nora Naranjo-Morse (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden 2016; National Museum of the American Indian 2016). The Musée Rodin in Paris, newly reopened in November 2015, has chosen to show the creative process of the artist as part of its display, resulting in much critical appreciation. Rodin's creative process, which involves multiple re-workings with different materials, was also the topic of an exhibition titled *Rodin: transforming sculpture*, at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem (MA), illustrating the current growing interest in how artists – both historical as well as contemporary - create works of art (Seaman 2016).

The interviewing techniques used in oral history, social sciences and anthropology have not always been part of conservators' skills sets. To remedy to this gap, Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA), the American branch of INCCA, has organized several artists' interviews workshops for conservators in the last few years.[i] The success of these workshops bears witness to the rapid expansion of this research method in the conservation of contemporary art. Other helpful resources for would-be interviewers include articles, conference proceedings and books such as the previously mentioned Beerkens et al (2012), combined with a modicum of common sense and good manners. Where it becomes more difficult and much less well documented is the question of the future of the data, how it is interpreted and made available.

Climbing the data mountain

A vast quantity and variety of material is produced from interviews. Data is commonly recorded in the form of audiovisual documents, audio records or written notes. These types of documentation are generally supported by additional material, gathered before and during the discussion, such as photographs, texts, receipts, letters, press clippings, materials and works of art in the studio. The collecting process is fully engaging in itself, with each new finding adding to the mounting knowledge about the artist or movement. The challenge however is to decide what to do with this

knowledge, how to organize it and what interpretive practices can be used to apply it to conservation needs (Figure 1).

Interdisciplinarity is necessary in this instance, not only was seen previously in relation to the techniques of interviewing, but also to the methods of analysis. These have been borrowed and adapted from other fields of study such as ethnography, social sciences, and environmental conservation, which are grounded in methods of qualitative analysis (Newing 2011). With this particular type of analysis, researchers build a narrative that describes and interprets what they have found through various methods of inquiry. Among many existing theories of interpretation and evaluation of data, the study of which goes beyond the scope of this article, conservation-focused researchers are quite well served by the 'grounded theory' (inductive research) method, often used in in the social sciences. Helen Newing (2011), a social scientist working in the area of environmental science with communities, describes it as a method of inquiry where a set of broad questions guides the data collection, with minimal use of pre-defined categories. The categories are determined through systematic examination of the data, through comparison and written analysis, thus identifying themes at this early stage only.

The theory or conceptual framework of analysis is therefore generated from what is found in the data, leaving space for unexpected ideas. Further data may be sought to fill some gaps and the themes can be strengthened through further levels of analysis (Charmaz 2006). Newing notes that interviews involve an 'intense interrogation of the data' (2011, p251) in order to constantly verify the common patterns and whether the interpretation is supported by the evidence. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative researchers as *bricoleurs,* people who make do with odds and ends to produce answers to their questions, using tools and strategies at hand and sometimes inventing their own tools. This description may resonate with conservators when they are in the process of interviewing artists, and trying to make sense of the quantity of material they quickly accumulate.

Data needs to be collated into a common form to allow it to be organised. This can take the form of texts, such as transcripts, or audio form, or in images, either still photographs or films. Quite often, studies on artists' techniques involve mixed methods

of data collection; these can include documentary research, material analysis, artists' interviews, related interviews with family, art suppliers and arts dealer, visual observation, and technical reconstructions. Initial classification of the information can be made according to research priorities for example by material, by size, by works of art or by period. Inside these broader categories, the initial analysis commonly employed in oral history and in working with focus groups involves writing annotations or keywords to mark sections of information. Newing underlines that this step is essential to enable the researcher to evaluate the overall quality of the data and to locate data on a specific theme (Newing 2011, p.243). Some sub-categories may emerge from this initial analysis of the data, and more evidence may be found on these themes in the existing information. Organising the data at this stage also means including secondary material that confirms or informs the evidence, as it is practiced in the ADP with inserts of photographs referring to the point discussed.

As the question of reliability is always present in qualitative research data, it is helpful to examine the methods of cross-verification or triangulation that are presented in the social sciences, and can be useful in art conservation (Hoffman 1996; Kelly 2004; Newing 2011). These include the comparison of findings collected by one method to other findings obtained by another or several other methods, in order to assess whether they are compatible with each other. For interviews in conservation, this could be the comparison of oral statements from the artist with technical examination of works of art and/or studio materials, or with results of the analysis. It can also include a comparison of technical documentation found in archival sources with observation of real works of art, or a comparison of information collected from the artist with information collected from another person, for example the art supplier, or the gallerist. Another possibility is to compare findings from technical reconstructions with observations of works; or to request artist's feedback on reconstructions, as was the case in the research on Mirka Mora's oeuvre. It is also interesting to compare one work of art with other works by the same artist, by other artists of the same circle or of the same period. In a similar vein, comparing one account with other accounts of the same event, or other studies of the topic, can be quite instructive.

Uniting these approaches is the contextualization of the data in order to allow the reader to judge the objectivity of the results. This includes locating the circumstances

of the interview, where it took place and under what conditions, as well as the researcher's background and interests prior to collecting the data. Interviewers bring something of themselves to their research: their unique personality, with its gendered, social and linguistic characteristics that will impact on the process and conclusion. This is the reason why most qualitative studies are reflexive, acknowledging the existing bias of their author, for example the grounds that he/she may share or not with the interviewee, such as gender, social class, geographical origin, family history or participation in a movement. This concept underpins Glenn Wharton's belief that the result of an artist's interview is a co-produced knowledge between artist and conservator (Wharton 2014). While not contesting its quality and relevance, acknowledging bias and the context of an interview are ways to recognise its evidential value and its possible interpretations.

Methods of analysis

Once classified, the next step is to analyse or make sense of the interview data. For texts, the method can be a simple discourse analysis, based on the contents of the interview only. The text of the transcript can be segmented into simple themes, which in turn can be divided into sub-themes if necessary (for example canvas paintings with oil, canvas paintings with acrylic, canvas paintings with multimedia). This can provide very effective information about the reality of an artist's practice by laying out the technique or multiple techniques used, the frequency and period of use, and the materials selected that can possibly provide a chronological approach to the artist's production.

However, in the social sciences and oral history, researchers often use more complex discourse analysis to propose an interpretation of the evidence. The use of these techniques in conservation is subject to debate, as conservation is traditionally more interested with the recording of facts, such as the physical description of alterations and their relation with processes of degradation of materials, than with the interpretation of discourses and how they relate to material traces, which underpins the social sciences. The existing debate, highlighted by the writings of Eastop (2006) and Scott (2015), is indicative of a shift in thinking towards an integration of the social sciences within conservation's methods of analysis.

Is interpretation an option?

There are different options and different 'schools of thought' about interpreting artists' interview data, varying from keeping the data as 'raw' as possible to the inclusion of varying degrees of interpretation. The ADP's interviews, for example, are either minimally edited or not edited at all, usually only containing cut away images of the works of art mentioned in the discussion, which are often other works by the same author. Carefully prepared, they follow the format of one single interview, undertaken in front of the works of art, which helps maintain the focus of the discussion and minimises digressions. Relatively lengthy, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, they are accompanied by a transcript and an index of referenced contents/subjects with their location in time, to enable ease of use. Other models such as those of Hirshhorn or NMAI present much shorter interviews, heavily edited because of time constraints or because they are destined for public access, as will be discussed further.

These models, however, do not adequately represent longer relationships with artists, which may comprise of multiple interviews, or interviews with several artists of the same movement or group. Marcal et al (2013) proposes a model of content analysis based on qualitative research that reviews and dissects parts of the discourse, while maintaining the relationship between them, in a process comparable to installation art. Their model of analysis involves two persons performing separate interpretations, dividing transcripts into themes and subthemes and comparing results to ensure the reliability of their interpretation. This represents a potential answer to the debate mentioned previously and is another useful technique drawn from the social sciences.

The purpose of extended researches is generally broader than a descriptive recording of the materials and techniques. It seeks an interpretation of the reasons why an artist adopted some materials or modes of making in their practice at a given point in time, and how this relates to their historic, social and personal context. Producing a timeline of the artist's life to map out the periods when the artist practised a technique or used a material, with their eventual overlapping and juxtapositions, can be illuminating, giving many insights into the relationship between life events and artistic practice. For example, in Mora's case, the elaboration and practice of her technique of painted soft

sculptures can be related to the artist's emotional state and the financial situation resulting from the separation with her husband. Likewise, the abandonment of this art form can be linked to the building of the artist's reputation and the subsequent improvement in her status and financial situation. Closer examination of the period bookended by these events provides further interpretations of the significance of the materials selected. For instance, in considering embroidery work and its feminine connotations paired with the low-key feminist attitude of the artist, highlights Mora's independence, and deliberate decision not to conform to the social models that were prevalent at the time.

The interview is usually not the only source of data; other evidence includes visual documentation, written sources and material analysis. For Mora, aside from her works of art observed in collections and in the artist's studio, which required another type of analysis closer to condition reporting, the evidence consisted of previous audio and audio-visual interviews, photographs, letters and press clippings. At this stage, complex discourse analysis can be useful to interpret all aspects of the various types of evidence collected (Fitzgerald 2002). This can range from the language and tone that are being used, to an analysis of the visual documentation featured in the data being examined, to photographs being 'deconstructed' to look at the presence or absence of surrounding people, of props and tools of the trade, of facial expressions and clothing.

Re-reading the interview and examining materials and practices throughout the artist's timeline of production may show broad themes that were not necessarily visible at the start of the process but are present in an artist's life and impact on their practice. For example, the extended interviews with Mora made apparent such issues as the importance of the artist's literary; her physical engagement with her work and how it impacted on her choices of media; as well as her informal relationship to contemporary social movements such as feminism and community arts that were manifested in the physical fabric of her works and their modes of making. These themes were originally pinpointed through examination of the interview data, and were cross verified by working across various other sources of data, such as works of art, and stories about their making, materials and historical documentation. Searching across sources helped to gather evidence in order to develop and illustrate the themes and orientate subsequent data collection in previously unexplored directions. Anecdotes, direct

quotes and visual documentation of evidence have demonstrated the relevance of these themes in the artist's oeuvre, and how they contributed in shaping it. It is however a balancing act to keep an open mind in relation to what is suggested by the information, while also keeping the preservation focus of the research, and ensuring the utility of the interpretation in this respect.

Meaningful research

During research for this paper, colleagues emphasized how the intended use of the interview determines both the content and methods of data analysis. For example, content will differ between an interview conducted to solve a specific conservation issue and another one made to inform the general safekeeping of an artist's works in an institution. Similarly, different aspects of an artist's technique will be highlighted according to the intended public. It is therefore useful, before starting the process of interviewing an artist, to return to the basics and state precisely the purpose of the particular interview.

A diagram of the many purposes an interview can encompass indicates when some can be performed and others not, in any single glance (Figure 2). In this diagram, knowledge transfer refers to the creation of a repository of information on an artist or a work of art that can be directed towards an immediate application, such as a conservation treatment for an exhibition, but is also available for future contexts. Harvesting knowledge from artists involves the conservator's time and energy, and above all, a longer time frame and generosity from the artist.

Usually, conservators receive more immediate benefits from an interview than the artist does. However for an artist, beyond any immediate technical concerns that might be concerning them, the benefits of talking to a conservator generally exist in terms of a work of art's longevity, reputation and related market value. Out of respect for the artist and as suggested by Beerkens et al. (2012), sharing the information should be part of the conservator's mission. This aims to protect artists from similar requests by other conservators in the future, provided that the act of sharing information is in line with existing confidentiality and privacy agreements with the artist. In Australia for example, the interviews with artists made within the framework of the Oral History Program of the National Library of Australia are a useful resource

to be consulted by conservators, although they rarely focus on technical issues. In Mora's case, it was very enlightening to compare information coming from previous interviews to the additional information collected twenty years later. In particular, the inaccuracies that occurred due to memory lapses could be addressed and further comments from the artist elicited.

However, while Beerkens et al. (2012) speaks of a joint approach between institutions to prevent duplicate requests, the dissemination of knowledge among the profession in general is worth focussing on. This means exploring ways to disseminate the knowledge as an integral part of the interview process. A recent Australian examples is the exhibition *Made to last*, organised in 2014 by the National Touring Support Victoria (NETS Victoria) in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. This exhibition featured video interviews of five contemporary artists talking about their materials and techniques and their thoughts on the conservation of their work (Vardy & Lewincamp 2014). The topic of dissemination, however, carries associated dangers and duties.

Artist's knowledge: is it ethical to circulate?

A common remark made by conservators are the privacy and copyright concerns as a result of possible forgeries, which is a major factor impacting upon the dissemination of the information collected during artist interviews (Figure 3). Confidentiality may apply to the artist's control over their image or to the content of the discussion, particularly when it was obtained during informal conversation, after mutual trust is established. For the conservator, respecting privacy also means asserting reciprocity and restraint at the centre of the relationship.

In interviewing Mora over an extended period of time, it was recognised that by regularly showing the artist how the information was used - for example in the production of texts, the development of conservation or installation guidelines or the production of illustrated transcripts of interviews – this act re-established the terms of the exchange and minimised the artist's feelings of loss of control. Another technique employed to maintain open communication and trust was through the creation of active workbooks (Figure 4). These workbooks contained the conservator's preliminary research, illustrated with photographs and text, often in the form of written questions

for the artist. During conversations over the workbooks, the answers were noted down, while the text and the photographs could be linked by arrows to illustrate a point or to develop further research directions along the way. This research approach generated new questions, often explained during another conversation, in a continuous process. The workbooks served as a central thread to refocus the discussion, helping to visually illustrate the correspondences between sources and to show any gaps in research.

These workbooks proved to be one of the most successful tools in the research process, as the artist could see how the information was being utilised and could also appreciate information coming from other sources. This contributed to the artist's sense of collaboration in the research as well as the outcomes. These documents can be considered as a user-friendly research tool and a pledge of reciprocity between researcher and artist. Lastly, with respect to the relationship between the conservator and artist, and regardless of the methods employed, it is essential to prioritise the information and recognise when the point of saturation is reached, when no substantial further learning can be gained by additional interviews and therefore to ultimately be respectful of the artist's privacy.

Institutions have various strategies to deal with confidentiality. Artists' attitudes may vary, for example on the topic of showing works in progress and commenting on the stages of creation, or on being filmed in person. As a consequence, some of the ADP's interviews do not show the artists but only the works of art upon which they are commenting, such as the institution's interview with Cy Twombly (ADP 2002). Legal rights to the work's image may also interfere with the diffusion of the film or stills. In addition, some artists may regret having divulged too much and request to leave the process. Even when agreement is initially obtained, artists may relinquish the material collected or wish to renegotiate agreements on different terms. Such processes are managed case-by-case and depend on the institution's mission and belief, and largely on the value placed on maintaining an ongoing relationship with an artist. These few examples illustrate just how diverse the situations can be, and the necessity for the frameworks for interviewing to be flexible and adaptable to each artist's personality.

Artists may be reluctant to agree to the publication of their interview or to be interviewed at all because they are weary of giving information that can later be used

by forgers. This is the main reason given to justify the fact that access to most databases held by ADP, INCCA, Glenstone Museum of Contemporary Art, Potomac, MD, NMAI, MoMA, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens is restricted to heritage professionals only. Considering that the likelihood of forgeries is proportional to the artist's market value, the relevance of this issue increases accordingly and may even determine the artist's agreement to provide technical details. While a discussion of the influence of market value on conservation is outside the scope of this article (see Larkin (2008) or Giebeler et al. (2014) for example), its impact on this issue requires conservators to carefully examine their duty of confidentiality in regard of the works of art's conservation needs.

Circulating information

Confidentiality and the respect of privacy have therefore a great influence over the dissemination of the information contained in the interviews (Figure 5). Both personal experience and research leads to the conclusion that it is more useful to store the raw data safely and share the interpretation, with the necessary contextualisation and restrictions. The processing of raw data is resource intensive, and a conservator's conclusions are usually relevant to professional colleagues. The data needs to be retained however in case of new research directions that were not explored in the first interpretation. The INCCA model of making a database accessible online for other conservators, is an effective procedure. INCCA stores the metadata only, it is then up to conservators to make contact to access the full content, either an interview or notes by a conservator, but then, copyright and privacy issues may arise. Furthermore, with any database containing sensitive information, or information that can potentially be misused (O'Connell et al. 2013), the difficulty can be amplified by the management requirement and procedures. For example, INCCA membership initially required its contributors to upload three to five contributions per year, which was not always feasible for private conservators. This has since been modified and since 2015 is no longer an INCCA membership condition.

At present there is no consensus over the format for the dissemination of artists' interviews. Experience shows that raw data is not very useful to other conservators because of economical and time constraints. It seems therefore than edited and illustrated transcripts are more useful documents, which provide relevant information

with supporting images to professionals. For video interviews, this may be achieved, for example by inserting close ups or stills of other works of art, editing out some content, or inserting comments. These illustrations, comments and insertions can effectively explain issues, concepts or additional works that are referred to during the conversation.

The aim of gathering data from interview is to inform conservation best practice, but it may likewise challenge conservation principles or lead to alternative ways of practising conservation. For example, artists may suggest new installations for their work, which is beyond the traditional role of a conservator, or the replacement of some parts, which can lead to specific technical investigations into the area concerned. Similarly, interviews may result in the broadening of preventive conservation measures, in agreement with the artist. In all cases, findings that can be of interest for the profession should be disseminated in relation to the conservation of this artist's work, through appropriate professional outlets.

Validity over time

Over the last few decades, conservators have gained more insights into the practice of artist interviews and how this method can be used in their discipline. An essential point is that an artist's ongoing relationship with their work changes over time. An artist's attitude towards conservation may also change, ranging from the acceptable level of ageing in their works of art, to the importance of certain elements over others, among many other issues. The conservation profession is therefore developing strategies to address the claim that artists' statements only have relative value and cannot always be used as a proof of the artist's will.

One consequence is that museums are increasingly establishing ongoing relationships with artists, and documenting their concerns on multiple occasions, to reflect the shifting desires of the artist regarding conservation issues, ranging from surface appearance to replacements of parts. The interviews, which record the artist intent at a point of time and within a particular framework, need to be contextualised clearly to avoid confusion for future researchers. Relationships depend heavily on the interpersonal skills of curators and conservators, who may adopt informal ways of communication such as telephone calls or social networks to maintain contact without

the difficulties of institutional encounters. Artists also can lead the initiative by taking active steps during their lifetime to create a legacy, as shown by the work of the Foundation Joan Mitchell and its CALL (Creating A Living Legacy) program that gives assistance to mature artists in organizing and archiving their work, as well as creating comprehensive and usable documentation of their artworks and careers. In 2015, VoCA partnered with the CALL program to organise a series of talks highlighting the innovative CALL initiative, while also underscoring the vital importance of speaking with artists about the production, presentation, and preservation of their work (VoCA network 2016).

In light of experience, the terminology central to the conservation of contemporary art has been revisited to reflect these pragmatic realities. The artist's intention, once considered absolute, can be seen as partly subconscious at the time of creation and therefore only moderately controlled by the artist. A theory developed by a branch of art criticism and inspired by post structuralism and Roland Barthes' 1967 essay *The death of the author*; has led to interviews being considered a better construction that depend on social and historical context and therefore have a degree of subjectivity similar to any other qualitative source (Gordon & Hermens 2013). Given its shifting character over time, the authority of the term 'intent' itself was questioned at the 43rd AIC meeting in Florida in May 2015, when Glenn Wharton advocated the use of the term 'artist's sanction'. This term was coined by S. Irvin in 2005, and reflects more accurately the fact that statements are made by artists at a certain time, in relation to a certain context, and cannot be considered universally true in different times and contexts. Being possibly less dogmatic than 'artist's intent', the term 'artist's sanction' includes the concepts of context and objectivity. It also reflects the collegiality of decision making between a range of museum professionals among which the artist has a privileged place, but not an absolute voice (Moody 2015). Rethinking the term also illustrates that subjectivity, if acknowledged, is an acceptable notion in conservation, which will influence decision making accordingly.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the practical and ethical protocols for artists' interviews, within the framework of the conservation of contemporary art. The benefits of this practice, that includes a material-based perspective placed on an artist's oeuvre and the new

understandings of the works that are derived from this knowledge, are now widely recognised in the conservation profession. This paper has attempted to explore methods to analyse the data collected, acknowledging the various components of this information that not only consists of words and images, but also works of art and raw materials. By proposing ways of interpreting and disseminating the information, and drawing attention to the ethical issues accompanying this practice, this paper aims at widening the sharing of knowledge gained from artist interviews within the profession, while recognising the degree of subjectivity and context dependency of an artist's word.

This integration of subjectivity in the process of decision making reflects the evolution of the conservation profession, among the many challenges posed by contemporary art. One of the most glaring is the question of whether to conserve at all the materiality of the work, a topic upon which some artists have been vocal, for example in 'The object in transition' conference at the Getty Centre in January 2008, or 'Authenticity in transition' conference at the Glasgow School of Art in 2014. In the words 'artist's sanction', the complexity of reaching decisions in conserving contemporary art is expressed, including the necessity of collaboration between the various protagonists who make up the art world. The whole range of possible decisions is much wider than before, including at one extreme the abandonment of the work's materiality while documenting the idea, as well as the integration of public response to art, the embrace of exhibition copies or replicas and the transmission of memory through performance re-enactment. While the goal remains the display, preservation and interpretation of art, the implications of each decision are more contrasted than ever. The artists interview practice therefore occupies a broader and also more central role in the conservation and life of contemporary art.

Biographies

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List of illustrations

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[i] in 2015, at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, at the Rubell Family Collection, and at Winterthur Museum / University of Delaware. In 2014, at the Lunder Conservation Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, at the Dallas Museum of Art and at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. In 2013, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Getty Conservation Institute. In 2012, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden.