

Documenting Three Complex Installation Artworks: Ways of Securing Knowledge and Information for Museum Practice in the Future

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Abstract

During the installation process of three complex contemporary installation artworks, the collections management department (author) documented working methods and performed research on the outcomes. The working methods were: artist interviews and artist collaboration, collecting (technical) data, filming, photographing, multidisciplinary expert meetings and knowledge exchange. The outcomes were used for registration purposes and information management. The following artworks were exhibited and were analysed during the documentation research:

Case Study 1: *Top Down, Bottom Up* by Driessens & Verstappen (process art) (2012); acquisition agreements as a starting point for installation instructions

Case Study 2: *Hout Auto* (Wood Car) by Joost Conijn (2001/2002); decision-making processes and documenting installations

Case Study 3: *Expecting* by Pipilotti Rist (multimedia artwork) (2011, 2014, 2016); artist's participation and dealing with information about exhibitions in shifting site- specific locations.

The research showed that by applying the working methods, knowledge could be registered and that metadata improved the functionality of guidelines and installation instructions. Changes to immaterial aspects such as context or processes could also be more effectively described. Recommendations based on the cases provide an insight into how to secure information and make documentation more accessible.

Keywords: Contemporary installation artworks, documenting, immaterial/intangible elements, artist interview, knowledge and information exchange, documentation research, museum collection, data registration, organisation policy

1 Introduction

The Centraal Museum Utrecht has a collection of more than 60,000 objects, divided into the following subsidiary collections: history, old masters, fashion, design and modern and contemporary art. The contemporary art collection contains a diverse group of installation artworks. Preserving and installing contemporary installation artworks is an ongoing working process that involves different tactics in order to secure information and knowledge about the artwork. These methods include; documenting the installation process, and creating structure in the registration. Another primary aspect is safeguarding communication with artists, their assistants, employees of borrowing institutions, technicians and other experts. This can be accomplished by conducting documentation research during exhibitions so that the intention of the artist and contextual aspects of the artwork can be registered.

To maintain these intangible elements as an essential part of the work for correct installation, accessible documentation is of vital importance in collections management. How to create this type of documentation and how to keep this type of information accessible is illustrated by the research results obtained during the installation of three different types of installation artworks. These three case studies show different approaches and provide an insight into how to understand installation artworks during their installation and display. The final goal of documenting installation artworks might be defined as a tool to install, preserve and exhibit the pieces for future generations. In these three cases, existing models, developed by other museum professionals, were employed and adapted. By doing so, new insights were gained that led to defying recommendations for additional museum practices in the field of documentation and knowledge exchange.

1.1 Methodology

Practicing collections management and working with contemporary installation art in a museum context has a specific focus on registration, documentation, conservation and presentation. The focal points of these four frameworks of collections management in relation to contemporary installation artworks has a long history. The research project *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art* (1995-99) resulted in the realisation of the model for data registration, the model for condition registration and the decision-making model.¹

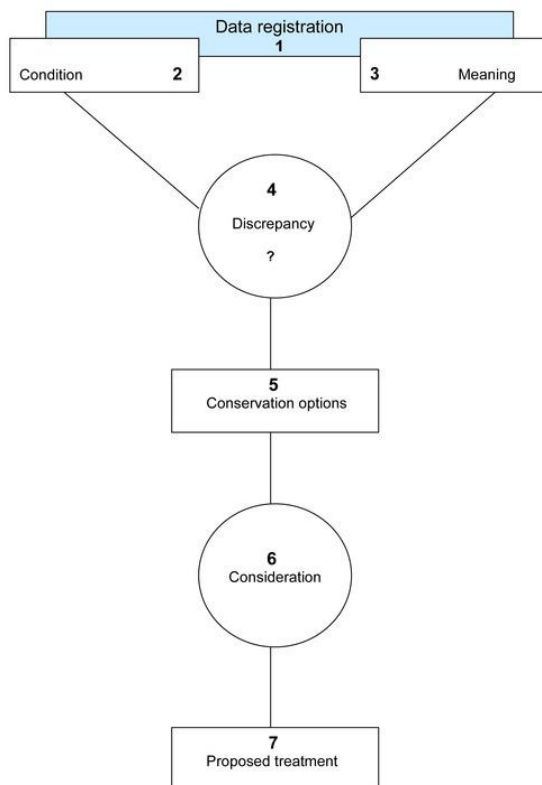


Fig. 1. Decision-making model for the Conservation and restoration of Modern Art, Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (Hummelen & Sillé 1999, p. 165).

The models are primary starting points and are applied in museum practice as knowledge-based tools for conserving modern and contemporary art. Artist interviews are another helpful tool and provide an important angle of observation. By interviewing and communicating with the artist directly, information, knowledge and personal intentions can be documented in order to make decisions. This interview method was developed during the research project *The Artist Interview* (1998-2005) and offers theoretical and practical guidelines to perform such communication and create documentation.² Additional strategies were developed in the international research project *Inside Installation: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks* (2007).³ For the conservation of media art and digital components of works in the collection, the Centraal Museum collaborates with the specialist conservation company LIMA in Amsterdam. LIMA preserves, distributes and researches media art and is an important partner in maintaining information and using digital installation components.⁴

¹ Hummelen, IJsbrand M. C., Sillé, Dionne, *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*, page 165; Decision-making model, page 179; The model for data registration, page 179; The model for condition registration.

² Beerkens, Lydia, *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art. Guidelines and Practice*, pp. 14-53.

³ Scholte, Tatja, Wharton Glenn, *Inside Installation: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks*

⁴ <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/nl>

1.2 Museum Practice and Methodology

Museum employees, technicians, artists, artist-assistants and borrowing institutions can become a collaborative team with the collective-goal to exhibit installation artworks. Mapping and documenting these working processes and collaborations produces essential information and can result in multi-levelled communication. This multi-level aspect contains knowledge and data that is used to preserve, exhibit and document the installation artwork.



Fig. 2. Video still of a filmed meeting with Centraal Museum employees from various departments (security, collections management, technical support and project coordination) and the artists Erwin Driessens and Maria Verstappen about realising their installation artwork *Top Down, Bottom Up* (2012) in the exhibition *Exploded View* in the Centraal Museum. Video and video still made by Arthur van Mourik (2012).

When installation artworks are exhibited, it is as if a book is opened and the viewer is able to read the artwork. Before it is installed, the artwork does not exist in its intended form. An installation artwork comes to life when it is installed in an exhibition. To exhibit the artwork, the accessibility of valuable information, data and knowledge about the artwork and its functionality is essential. Any type of information can prove valuable for the re-installation of installation artworks. The artist's intention can only be secured if the registration and documentation are available and can be applied for re-installation. The intention can be interpreted as an intangible element that is a key to unlocking the artwork and its authentic value. This value, all other types of information, agreements, data and knowledge are combined in a documented form that holds the essence of the artwork and aims to describe content, installation instructions and technical functionality. Metadata structures and the Content Management System (CMS) ADLIB offer ways of storing the documentation if information management is applied correctly and sufficiently. The following case studies illustrate the different approaches and outcomes.

2.1 Case Study 1: Top Down, Bottom Up by Driessens & Verstappen

In 2011, the Centraal Museum commissioned artists Erwin Driessens (Wessem, the Netherlands, 1963) and Maria Verstappen (Someren, the Netherlands, 1964) to create an artwork for the exhibition *Exploded View*, shown at the museum from the 7 July to 28 October 2012. As part of the commission, it was the museum's intention to purchase the artwork for the collection after the exhibition. To formalise this commission and acquisition, the collections management department prepared an agreement based on an existing and legally approved contract for municipal art assignments.

Top Down, Bottom Up (2012). The artist duo also collaborated to present the work during the exhibition. This installation artwork consists of four 'melting-machines' with heating elements that were mounted vertically to the ceiling of the exhibition space. Purpose-made blocks of beeswax were placed inside the melting machines. During the exhibition, the heating system of one machine at a time was activated during opening hours. The heat caused the blocks of the beeswax to melt and drip onto the floor. The re-congealed wax gradually formed a stalagmite.



Fig. 3. Installation view *Top Down, Bottom Up*,
Photo by Driessens & Verstappen



Fig. 4. Starting point of stalagmite, Centraal
Museum 2012, photo by Arthur van Mourik



Fig. 5. Centraal Museum employee
breaking stalagmites, 2012, photo by
Arthur van Mourik

For the exhibition, an exact number of wax blocks was produced so that after a stalagmite was completed another melting machine would start to create a stalagmite. This process was repeated until the end of the exhibition. The museum's technical department was instructed to refill the melting machines with new blocks of wax when needed. When the exhibition ended, the stalagmites were demolished and taken back to the artists' studio. There, the artists melted the beeswax into new blocks again. Each melting machine requires approximately 200 kg of beeswax. The exhibition space had a specific height, which influenced the dripping duration to create a stalagmite. The artwork can be defined as follows: the heating of the wax blocks, the dripping of the wax, its solidification into a stalagmite and its being melted to recreate the wax blocks that are then subjected to the same process once again is a 'performative' cycle. The dripping of the wax is an event that can be repeated. The exhibiting of the artwork is thus the 'performance' of the dripping. The museum acquired two of these cycles. The following physical objects were acquired for the museum collection: one melting machine, 200 kg of beeswax in blocks, three pouring moulds (two for four litres and one for two litres) and the edition 1/4. The artwork was described by the artists as a process with a sequence that needs to be repeated in the following order: the blocks need to be melted, after the beeswax has formed into stalagmites, the stalagmites must be melted into blocks again. And so on.

2.2 Conclusion

The process of dripping can be seen as a performative process and is the intangible representation of the artwork. In order to document this process, the artists programmed a smart phone installed on the ceiling of the exhibition space to take photos of the dripping at regular intervals, creating a time-lapse film that recorded the dripping process. This document is of great importance for the collection documentation and was integrated in the CMS ADLIB object record. All other important documents were also integrated in ADLIB, including the installation instructions created during the exhibition and the countersigned acquisition- and commission agreement.

During the working process of the exhibition and acquisition, artist interviews were conducted in combination with project meetings for technical realisation. The recorded artist interviews and intensive collaboration were documented and are now accessible via metadata. All these documents can be used for future installations of the artwork. The artists intentions have been documented as well as and the definition of the artwork: the process of dripping and recycling. The combination of these two aspects form the definition for preserving and exhibiting the artwork.⁵

3.1 Case Study 2: *Hout Auto* (Wood Car) by Joost Conijn

In 2001 artist Joost Conijn (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1971) created *Hout Auto* (Wood Car) from the base of a Citroën DS, building the chassis from plywood and installing a wood-burning apparatus that powered the engine instead of petrol. In 2002, the artist drove *Hout Auto* through fifteen European countries, collecting wood along the way and documenting his journey on video. The artwork comprises the car and the video, which is on a DVD (the master version is preserved on mini DVCAM by LIMA, Amsterdam, The Netherlands).



Fig. 6. Joost Conijn's *Hout Auto* (Wood Car), Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photo by Ernst Moritz

The Centraal Museum purchased the *Hout Auto* in 2003. Before the *Hout Auto* became part of the collection, the artist disconnected the wood-burning mechanism so that the car could be powered by petrol. Like every Citroën DS, *Hout Auto* has a hydraulic suspension system. In order to move the vehicle, the motor must be switched on so that the base of the car is lifted. After lifting, *Hout Auto* was driven by a specialist technician and could be installed for presentation purposes. A pipe was used to vent the exhaust fumes outside the museum in order to protect the controlled exhibition spaces. Various challenges to preservation and safety were discussed. It was important to prevent degradation of engine parts and it became clear that the condition of the components was not sufficiently documented. The instructions for presenting *Hout Auto* are: display the car with a raised base, in static mode and alongside the film so that the two can be viewed simultaneously. The artwork can be defined as exhibiting the car and the film together as a pair and should be documented as such. Because the preservation and installation procedures were complex, risky and labour intensive, the Centraal Museum started a research project in 2015 to determine if the vehicle should be kept as a moving car or as an immobile artwork. This topic, discussed during an interview with the artist, resulted in the following conclusions:⁶

- moving the car or using the engine is not essential for the artwork from the artist's point of view
- the car battery can be removed
- by maintaining oil in the engine, parts and devices can be preserved more effectively for a longer period
- the engine should not be removed
- a permanent, raised "driving position" of the base can be realised

The Centraal Museum discussed all of the outcomes and suggestions with museum professionals (conservators, collections management staff and scientists) and with the technical mechanic of the car during two multi-disciplinary meetings organised by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art

⁵ Van Mourik, Arthur, *Model for Artist interviews, Preserving Process Art*. Research thesis Reinwardt Academy at the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, 2007, p. 77.

⁶ Joost Conijn, interview by Marije Verduijn, head of collections management, Centraal Museum Utrecht, 29 October 2015.

(Stichting Behoud Moderne Kunst).⁷ The following conclusions were drawn from the artist interview and knowledge exchange with other experts: the materials will be restored; the engine will be disconnected but the possibility of future use will be maintained; the oil supply will be preserved; the vehicle will be technically modified for a permanently raised car base (driving position) for presentation purposes; and the car will be moved in the future without using the engine.⁸

3.2 Conclusion

Conducted research and exchanging knowledge resulted in new insights concerning presentation and preservation. These new methods of taking care of the vehicle will be realised in the future. Because transporting the *Hout auto* to exhibition locations and installing the artwork still remains complex, clear information and instructions are of great importance for future collections management. The decisions to restore various engine parts and the technical modification resulting in a raised car base still require prior documentation. The history of the object and previous installation methods, including film of the installation process, will remain points of reference. Accessing these documents through ADLIB will provide installation instructions and insights concerning the new decisions and documented knowledge. The outcomes and new understandings will be used as a primary directory in conserving the artwork.



Fig. 7. Engine during maintenance, photo by Arthur van Mourik, 2013



Fig. 8. *Hout Auto* (Wood Car) on a transportation pallet in storage, photo by Arthur van Mourik, 2017

4.1 Case Study 3: Expecting by Pipilotti Rist (2001, 2014, 2016)

In 2001, the Centraal Museum commissioned artist Pipilotti Rist (Grabs, Switzerland, 1962) to make an installation artwork for the collection. The artist created the site-specific installation *Expecting* (installation in and for the Centraal Museum, Utrecht), 2001, Upper chapel: *When I Run I Use My feet*, Lower chapel: *One Jesus in Nature, One at the Doctor, One in the Hotel*. The multimedia installation included video files, a net curtain, computers, mirrors, a sound system, audio files, moving spotlights, textile curtains, light projections and a humidifier with peppermint oil. The installation was made for a specific location in the museum building: the medieval convent of Saint Agnes. Using the monastic chapel space as part of the installation gave the work a religious context: 'In the upper and lower chapels of the medieval convent of Saint Agnes, the earthly and the heavenly are presented as worlds that flow into each other. The projections include images of crucifixion and branding; the smell of peppermint is a tried and tested means of driving out demons. The music, specially composed by Rist and performed with Anders Guggisberg and Roli Widmer, amplifies the sense of being carried away.'⁹ In 2012, it was decided to renovate the convent of Saint Agnes and transform the location into an entrance area.

⁷ www.sbm.nl

⁸ Rivenc, Rachel and Bek, Reinhard, *Keep It Moving? Conserving Kinetic Art*, Getty Conservation Institute, Article; *The Conservation Ethics of and Strategies for Preserving and Exhibiting an Operational Car: The Motion and Standstill of Joost Conijn's Hout Auto (Wood Car)*, by Van Mourik, Arthur (2018), page 146 and weblink:

⁹ Exhibition text, copyright Centraal Museum.

As such, the space could no longer be used for installing Rist's artwork and the site-specific aspect of the installation was lost. The work was exhibited for the last time in the convent of Saint Agnes in 2012 and was documented on film.¹⁰

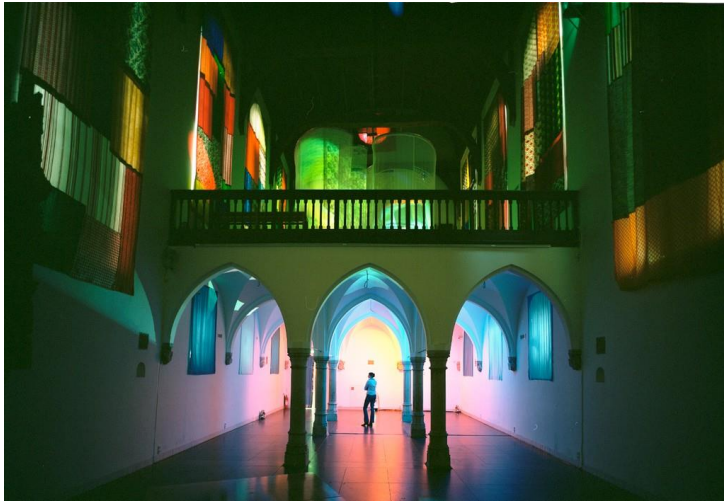


Fig. 9. Installation view *Expecting* in the convent of Saint Agnes, Centraal Museum, photo by Ernst Moritz.

In order to safeguard the artwork, new plans for its re-installation were discussed. The museum decided to re-install the work in a different space in the Centraal Museum in 2014 as part of the exhibition *Surreal Worlds* (2014). Because the selected space was a white cube, the re-installation process raised multiple issues. Firstly, the artist was contacted to agree on this new form of installation. The artist approved the plans and an agreement was signed. The artist sent an assistant to supervise the installation. Advances in digital-projection technology made it possible to use improved hardware and a Moving Mirror System (MMS) to project the videos. The MMS coordinates were programmed for dimensions of the specific exhibition space and could be used for any future location with the same dimensions. The video and audio files were transferred from DVD to digital files that could be played on a loop on BrightSign players, using upgraded software. In order to preserve the religious context, a selection of religious stone sculptures from the collection dating from the fifteenth century were included in the installation and displayed on specially designed, dark-coloured plinths. The videos were projected onto the mirrors of the MMS. The mirrors were programmed to turn so that deformed projections of the videos were seen on the sculptures and in the space. The mirrors were driven by self-developed software on an e:cue Butler (hardware).

The peppermint smell was re-used as well and only the short curtains were hung. Once the artist approved the result, the installation was documented by mapping the exhibition space to scale using AutoCAD software, taking overview photographs and a video, registering inventory numbers of the installation components after dismantling, documenting the artist's intentions and contracts, digital and technical information and making brief summaries of correspondence with the team and artist. All these documents were integrated in the collection record in ADLIB. The video and audio files and MMS software for this version of the installation were stored for conservation at LIMA so that the installation could always be exhibited in its new form, now specifically for a white-cube space with the exact corresponding measurements.

The installation hasn't been installed in the Centraal Museum since then but it was requested for loan for the exhibition *Kairos Castle: The Art of the Moment* at Gaasbeek Castle in Belgium. (1 April – 18 June 2017). The artist and her assistant were contacted again and agreed to reinstall the artwork once more. The entire process was repeated in a new space to achieve the artist's intended 'look and feel' of the artwork. A selection of curtains was used, stone religious sculptures were provided by the borrowing party and were approved by the artist. The MMS machines were reprogrammed so that the projections could be customised for this space. After inspection, the newest version was approved by the Centraal Museum and the artist. The installation was documented by taking photographs and filming the result, the curtains were physically numbered and instructions for re-installing were recorded.

¹⁰ Video recording published by the Centraal Museum, 30 July 2012
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMF_jfI9tIQ.

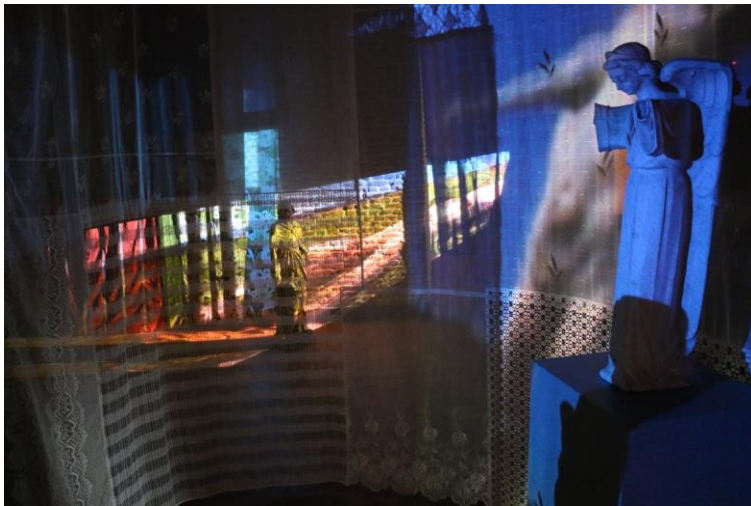


Fig. 10. Installation view *Expecting* in exhibition *Kairos Castle: The Art of the Moment* at Gaasbeek Castle in Belgium., 2017, photo by Arthur van Mourik

3.2 Conclusion

Bundling information as installation instructions for the content-management system was a primary focus during the working process. Knowledge exchange between technicians, the artist and assistant, and the borrowing party were essential to build an overview of information. To shift a site-specific installation to a new location required effort and insight into the meaning of the artwork. By using religious sculptures, the religious context was preserved and seems to be a key aspect of the artwork. Furthermore, the improved technology used, the collaboration with artist's assistant, the agreement for modification and reinstallation and the important decisions to work on new versions of the installation in new locations, pointed and the out that this type of collections management can be more dynamic than just preserving objects conventionally.

4. Recommendations for museum practice: securing knowledge and information

Reviewing these case studies shows that installing the artworks requires specific approaches to make decisions. The registration and documentation were based on information that came from employees, artists or were gleaned from the materials themselves. The work's exhibition history also provided insights into ways of dealing with different types of information. The conclusions drawn from the three case studies resulted in the following recommendations for securing information and making it accessible during acquisition, preparation and installation. Ethical considerations, interpretation of immaterial elements and re-presentation based on memory of moments in the past remain crucial.

4.1 Work-flows, working-methods and installation instruction

During exhibitions all activities result in a collection of information and knowledge that can be captured within the following workflows and working-methods;

- Conducting artist interviews and making transcripts
- Creating agreements for purchasing or commissioning artwork
- Documenting working processes: collaborating with experts (technicians, artist's assistants) transcripts of meetings
- Documenting the artwork in its completed form while on display (video and photographs)
- Information management: structure documents via metadata based on the registration CMS
- Registration of important decision making about the intention of the artwork and other intangible elements (context, process or functionality)
- Conservation of digital components require treatment that can be outsourced
- Procedures concerning installations exhibited by borrowing institutions at different locations are administrated in a loan agreement with supplementary procedures (such as instructions)

All these elements can be used to reinstall an installation artwork as it was intended. To make all these aspects accessible, a written WORD or PDF document can be used to hold all essential types of information and can be made findable easily via a hyperlink in the object record of ADLIB.

This document can be named 'installation-instructions' and includes the following types of information:

- Registration information about the object, involved persons and dates
- Inventory numbers for components with description and requirements (equipment)
- Description of the installation artwork in exhibited form at that time including:
 - Text about exhibition title and period
 - Text about the functionality of the artwork (such as audio and video), content, intent and appearance
 - Overview photographs
- Scale plan with dimensions and inventory numbers
- Text instructions relating to physical components in correct order relating to inventory-numbers, photographs of a previous installation and technical drawings
- Specification of the technical equipment for installation of digital files (audio, video)
- Transcript of artist interview
- Summary of meetings with experts and employees

Note: There are more important documents applicable such as purchase agreements, license agreements, authenticity certificates, instructions made by the artist or gallery. These documents were linked separately to the record in the CMS, with a footnote referring to them in the installation instructions.

4.2 Preservation

Installing artworks for the first time in your own museum or at another location on loan can result in decisions that are difficult to make. There is a big difference between using and interpreting existing documentation and creating and applying new documentation. By documenting the artist intent and the moments installation-artworks are exhibited the created documentation might convert into a conservation method. As with restoration and conservation projects, it can be useful to train students to make installation instructions in museums and to create related documentation. This training could offer new pragmatic solutions in museum practice.

4.3 Policy, implementation and possibilities

Workflows in organisations, specialisations of employees and decision-making are all of great importance in museum practice. Each organisation structure is different. Knowledge, information, insight and expertise are imbedded differently in each organisation and need custom interpretation and approaches. The way the registration of knowledge and information is realised depends on an organisation's capabilities. Organising work flows for data and the use of consistent metadata structures within a museum are fundamental for accessing the information records. Time and budgets are important but a realistic working method must also be maintained. Therefore it is important to create an organizationpolicy that describes all the key-methods of incorporating information and knowledge about installation-artworks so that it integrates the expertise of all the museum staff involved. For now it seems that it is not the question what the content of policy should be. After creating these procedures the most urgent question is; how can such policy be complied with and be implemented in practice in the long-term? Continuing research on this topic might reveal the answers.

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