

Frederika Huys
A Methodology for the Communication with Artists

For the management and the conservation of contemporary works of art it is indispensable to collect data and to research what can be added to these. Usually the present frame within which data are collected consists of a basic record and a record of the work's condition. Apart from these, several instruments may serve to support the management of the collection (transport documents, photographs, videos, guidelines, etc.).

A limited web of elements, required to give the work its place within the collection of the museum, is therefore already at our disposal. Apart from these essential data, we wish to provide a survey of all elements relevant to the artist or his or her oeuvre. The web for the conservation of contemporary art will thus create an impulse to add to this survey information of other museums or information from other resources. The survey will include information regarding materials and techniques, information regarding the artistic content of the work, biographical data, data regarding the restoration history, relevant documents and objects. Once this basic survey is available, it will be of fundamental importance for the management of the works. It is a striking fact that artists often have their own idiosyncratic means to communicate information. Precisely because this information is related to the peculiar characteristics of the artist, a first approach to the work may be deduced. Experience will gradually teach which gaps exist, leading to specific questions, departing from the artist's frame of mind and concerning the activities of the artist, the future presentation of the work and the evolution of the artist's oeuvre.

If the restorer is able to assess which information is required to exert his or her profession, an adequate basis is available. Furthermore, in my view it is also necessary to create a structure to which elements can be added in the future. This structure should include visual material concerning the installation of the work in various locations, and a record of how the work is experienced by the public, critics, the museum staff and everyone involved in the work; it should also include a survey of the materials used by the artist and of the materials prepared by the restorer for the conservation and management of the work.

This huge mass of information should be filed into archives: artists' archives, a lively record documenting a large number of activities relevant to contemporary works of art. What we need is a structure which fades the present difference between the collection, the library, photo and slide archives, documentation and multimedia centres. The structure I am referring to is in other words a leitmotif with which as many aspects as possible are associated, aspects which refer to the practice of the artist. In first instance often a distinction will be made between the artistic elements (i.e. those referring to the collection) and the framework (i.e. elements which document the work). However, important aspects of the artistic forms of expression may end up in a vague, intermediary zone because of this distinction.

The most obvious example is that of 'editions'. 'Editions' - which also from an economic point of view may have a varying status - can be 'upgraded' by including them in the collection, as outsiders among the 'unique' works and the 'classical' graphic works, for which a suitable filing system exists. Or they can be 'downgraded', by including them into one of the documentary files. Also invitation cards belong to this vague category. Every time we receive something by post which reveals itself as an object or a gesture, rather than as a piece of printed matter, we are reminded of the fallibility, the restrictive character of the distinction between art and non-art. How should we react? Is there an alternative between responding to the invitation and leaving it somewhere about the house¹?

Also books confront us with this problem. Informative books or reference works can be filed according to a logical classification within the structure of the library. But 'the book' as an artistic form of expression is an art medium. It is a form of art like a painting, a sculpture or a video installation. Where should we file the book, how to present it, how to interpret it?

¹ Bart De Baere, *Het geïntegreerde museum*, p.3-5.

Cooperating with the artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx is fascinating because of the way various parts of her work combine within her oeuvre. The aspect of transferring a work to a collection constitutes a very significant act for Tuerlinckx. Together with us she wishes to develop a concept within which her work fits, but which is also sufficiently flexible.

In her work Tuerlinckx combines slides, ribbed forms, tapes, books and other media. The space or the concept of the exhibition may lend another meaning to her work. When an installation is presented in a room, the work may be arranged in various ways. The artist has therefore elaborated a script with guidelines concerning the various ways to present her installations. We have made a survey of two arrangements, and we wish to add to this information concerning the presentation. The artist has agreed to be present at the next occasions her work is presented, i.e. on various locations, which will provide us, as the manager of the work, the opportunity to gain a clear image of the variable presentation.

The idea and the concept are the elements which should be retained, but the material form can be created or adapted following the artist's guidelines, i.e. every part of the work is replaceable and the reproduction of the parts is recorded on video. The video shows us, for example, how the artist tears or folds a sheet of paper to produce a square or a ribbed form, or how she arranges glass shelves in a cupboard. The process has been filmed, as we actually are the memory of the artistic practice. In Tuerlinckx's view 'the presentation is the work'. Therefore, we should not speak of the representation of an oeuvre. The work consists of a combination of elements, each of which may appear or not, depending on the context. Tuerlinckx's work in the S.M.A.K. actually consists of a scaffolding of forms, inscriptions and visual material. Through the combination of these elements, the work takes shape.

Tuerlinckx's guidelines concern the combination of ribbed forms, the projection of images, the various dimensions of these, and the restoration of certain elements. In first instance we conserve the work; if necessary we restore and reproduce the work. The video documents the creation of a rectangular shape using plain paper. The video is a record of the way the artist folds and links the pieces of paper. Furthermore, the artist informs us about the presentation and conservation of books, slides, coloured pieces of cloth and various media.

For Tuerlinckx, the video is of major importance, even essential: without it, she cannot transfer works to museums or collectors. Once the work is installed, without the video one would have no idea how to handle the work. The presentation of the work would remain unchanged, until finally its fragility causes it to disintegrate. The artist's guidelines explain which elements should be linked, and which should not, to save the work from destruction. Also the possibilities of material changes, i.e. substitutions are treated. A tape, a sheet of paper, or a slide are ephemeral objects, always subject to movement. They become dirty, the colours fade, they crease. For this sort of work the artist's guidelines are the only guarantee that it will continue to exist.

The process of creating is for contemporary artists quite often a sort of material; it constitutes a domain of possibilities - a fact artists are very much aware of. The process becomes part of the work and the work is presented within a certain context. Variable elements are part of the work and need to be included in the technical description of the work. The description is a continuous discourse, without beginning or end, within which continuous relations are recognizable.

After the initial installation of the work, new presentations may bring about certain changes of meaning, even if the artist is involved in these new installations. Furthermore, there are material changes: every action, every day of the exhibition, may involve problems concerning the work. We should produce a manual, a technical description which is merely instrumental, not unlike a device which assists us to use something. This device should be a lively source of information, a never ending record of experiences.

How do we describe experiences? Which experiences are relevant in this case? Everyone agrees that in this instance the artist's experiences are fundamental. In a collection the experiences of the staff and those from outside are linked to the work. They constitute a framework for the work and

accompany the work through time. A discussion with the artist is therefore of structural importance. The various goals of the managing institution determine the relation with the work. In museums the works of art are presented to the public, they are conserved, researched, made accessible. In discussions with the artists these four functions constitute the global structure.

Because we are familiar with the fact that essential information can be gathered during the installation of the work, during the creative process, through informal talks or by other means, we could create an open structure, in which there is room for various views and methods. Following the artist's steps, we will minimize the risk of dirigisme.

After the last incca-meeting, I have researched some theoretical sources for a description of 'communication and information'. I have quote from these sources here, precisely because we want to document a record of communications, in order to gather information. Communication is what provides links and webs in the information system, within which we situate ourselves as a excerpters, transferring the information.

'Within social systems not only the nodes between the communicative elements are characterized by a selective or contingent character. Indeed, every communication is in itself a synthesis of three selections: also the statement, the information and the understanding are contingent. There is always the possibility that the communication refers to something else than that about which it actually informs. The way in which the information which has been selected, is stated - and I will repeat it once more: the information can also follow from a non-statement - is in itself selective. What is being said in a conversation can be said in various ways: friendly or spitefully, with enthusiasm or neutral, merely establishing a fact, with or without rhetorical frills. Of course, also understanding the information which has been stated is a selective operation, a contingent interpretation. The threefold selectivity of contingency of each communication precludes a sincere or genuine speech act. There are always too many possibilities for a single communication to pass as necessary, to match perfectly what one consciously experiences, feels or thinks'².

The way we observe and communicate is indeed specific: we take care of art collections, a profession for which specific knowledge has to be acquired. The relationship with works of art and their presentation, the confrontation with the public, the conservation and restoration of works of art are the major themes of the interviews I conduct.

In my interviews I formulate questions regarding guidelines. Before I conduct the interview I enquire into the nature of the artist's oeuvre. The interviews often start with a specific case. I enquire into the artist's point of view regarding conservation and restoration.

I interviewed Jef Geys about his work in our collection on June 7th last. The artist wished to draw up a written document which was to be signed by both parties. Jef Geys refuses to make statements about his work, because he refuses to be quoted, while he remains open to the reactions of other people. In order to be able to produce the written document, a protocol of our meeting, I had brought a video camera. The artist expressly wishes that the video is not shown to third parties. Because of the deontological aspects and because this is a matter of trust, I will respect the will of the artist. I am considering to destroy the video tape.

Jef Geys has produced installations, photographs, videos, maquettes and sculptures, all of which are conceptual in nature.³ His method consists of a strategic 'policy of infiltration', with which he seeks to penetrate social systems to achieve peaceful changes. Since 1971 all his projects are

²Rudi Laermans, *Communicatie zonder mensen. Een systeemtheoretische inleiding in de sociologie*, Boom, Amsterdam, 1999, p.82-83.

³Recent projects of the artist: Le magasin de Grenoble (1989), The São Paulo Biennial (1991), Middelheimmuseum Antwerpen (1999).

accompanied by articles in the *Kempens Informatieblad*, a magazine he edits and for which he also writes. The illustrated magazine is distributed freely and functions as a free 'aid': text, explanations and sources assist the public in acquiring knowledge about the project the artist proposes. The artist hopes his projects are mind-expanding; therefore he often breaks with taboos.⁴

The concept of dialectics, the processing of acquired knowledge, the presentation of it and its inherent limits constitute the basic aspects of Geys's artistic practice. Throughout his oeuvre Geys sympathizes with the 'world', trying to bridge the gap between art and society. Adding to his personal story, Jef Geys seeks to strip art from its the unworldly and isolated cocoon, using a communicative strategy.

Our conversation is about an installation owned by the Flemish Community, given in permanent loan to the S.M.A.K. During his forty-year career as an artist, Geys was a prolific writer and his texts have now been collected into a single archive. The letters and certain documents cannot be consulted by the public.

All documents are filed into various Perspex boxes. Because these are closed, the curiosity of the public is roused, making us think about collecting, archives, storing objects.

Patrick Lebet's work is entitled *Quelques mètres de Pollock*. The sculpture was exhibited only once in the museum. It consists of woolen threads, which are arranged in such a way as to represent a bed. The upper end consists of a tangle of countless woolen threads. When we uninstalled the work, it was obvious that we could not retain the global shape. The woolen threads had been laid directly on the floor. Had we tried to push something underneath them, the structure would have changed. The slightest change disturbs the pure, spontaneous movements we find in both Jackson Pollock's action paintings and in this sculpture. When the artist had installed the work in the museum, the installation had been recorded on videotape from beginning to end. The artist systematically put layer upon layer, and Lebet compared the process to the layers of a traditional painting. He started with a white ground, and continued with yellow, gray, and then with brighter colours.

Lebet has agreed that, with the help of the video, I will install the work the next time it is exhibited, after which he will come to inspect the installation. He has agreed to a video interview on that occasion. I will ask questions concerning the work and its conservation, he will ask questions to me about the realization of the work as a performer.

Artists are often quite enthusiastic when I ask their permission to film them during the artistic process, e.g. when they realize a wall painting, a sand carpet, or when they install or exhibit a work. Whereas we are searching solutions concerning the management and conservation of works of art, some artists are searching how their work can be suitably manipulated. The integration of a work within an art collection depends on the possibilities to manage the work. Artists have produced lots of objects to assist with the conservation and the management of the work.

Examples:

- With Suchan Kinoschita we have produced a document, consisting of texts she dictated. A description, photographs and a plan of how the elements are to be arranged, enables the functioning of the installation.

- Peter De Cupere produces scented installations, mould installations, disappearing-art,... When a work is purchased, he makes a CD-ROM with images concerning the installation of the work.

- Jason Rodes: script and video about the dismantling

⁴ Openluchtmuseum voor Beeldhouwkunst Middelheim, Text written on the occasion of the exhibition of Jef Geys (September 12th - November 14th, 1999).

- Spare parts, accessories and remnants are conserved in what we call the material archive (artist boxes). The archive is under construction and will be a major resource and a concrete reference. In the structure of the documents I would like to include this item. (pictures of boxes of Soli Lewitt, Edward Lipski, Charlene Teters, Mark Manders)

Questions for an Interview

1. Management and presentation

- How can the work be exhibited.
- Can the arrangement of the elements be changed?
- Can someone else decide about the arrangement?
- Can you provide guidelines for the arrangement?
- In what sense does the installation differ in a square space and a narrow, rectangular space?
- Would you place the work in a corner or in the middle of the room?
- Can the work be combined with other works of the collection? Can they be exhibited together?
- Would you like to be involved in future exhibitions of the work?

2. Public function

- How should we, as an institute which manages works of art, deal with the reactions of the public?
- Do you have any suggestions concerning this subject?
- Does curiosity of the public incite questions concerning the content of the work? What information should the museum staff communicate to the public?

3. Conservation

- What are your views concerning the conservation of art?
- Often works of art are touched and/or opened. What are your views in this matter?
- Are there any acceptable means to create a barrier around the work? (Some form of boundary, Perspex boxes, a borderline with tape).
- Which materials do you use for your work?
- Where do you buy these materials?
- Dust and other things may change the appearance of the work in the course of time. What are your views concerning these changes?

Dust:

Stains:

Tears:

Fading of colour, patina:

Mould, stains caused by moisture:

- Would you like to be involved in future restorations?

4. Research

- Which persons have a strong bond with your work? Do you work with assistants?
- Are any sources, texts, or is any other information essential for your work?
- Am I allowed to hand down the information gathered from this interview, so that colleagues may benefit from it?

June 2000

Frederika Huys is conservator at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent.