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A behaviour index for complex artworks: A conceptual tool for contemporary art conservation

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KEYWORDS: contemporary art, conservation theory, site-specificity, installation art, variable media approach, biographical approach, autoethnography, decision making

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a model that visualises the effect of decision making in the conservation and presentation of complex artworks: a *behaviour index*. It is a conceptual tool that is especially useful when managing unconventional artworks that are variable in nature. Inspired by the variable media approach, the concept of an artwork's 'behaviour' is adopted to analyse an artwork's successive manifestations over time. This reveals the impact of museum practice and the role of the people who conserve, install or perform the work. The idea is to implement the concept of a behaviour index as an interactive digital tool in museum collection management systems. This not only provides insight into an artwork's biography, but also enforces accountability from those having to make decisions about the artwork's appearance every time it is put on display.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary artworks have become increasingly challenging for the field of conservation. Aside from unconventional use of materials and diverse forms of expression, they can include conceptual features that are immaterial in nature and variable in form. Artworks are no longer merely objects, but can be process-based and even open-ended in nature. This leaves museum professionals with the task of managing these complex artworks to the best of their ability, often requiring their active engagement to make them manifest. In that case, the resulting manifestations can be considered co-produced with the museum, even when museum professionals, such as conservators, try to act as 'neutrally' as possible (Stigter 2015).¹

While conservation ethics prescribe a restrained attitude, minimal intervention and an objective approach, this is not always possible for art that is intended to change or has no fixed form. Even in traditional conservation, it has been recognised that in practice it is not possible to act in a truly objective way (Villers 2004). There are always choices to be made. Decision making in conservation largely depends on the political and social context in which a work of art functions. Thus, subjective input is inevitable and this is magnified when working with complex artworks. This means that different conceptions of the same artwork can lead to different representations. In order to become more aware of our own responsibility as professionals, the idea of working with a *behaviour index* for complex artworks is proposed, anticipating a shift from object-based research to process-based research in the field of conservation.²

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The proposed behaviour index for complex artworks is based on three different theoretical models that have emerged over the last two decades to address the challenges in the conservation of contemporary art: the variable media approach, the biographical approach, and the autoethnographic approach.

The variable media approach is based on the idea of categorising artworks according to their 'behaviour' rather than their material or technique, to

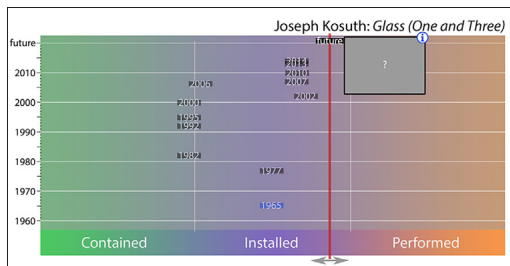
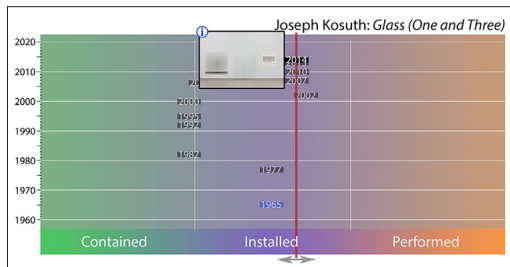
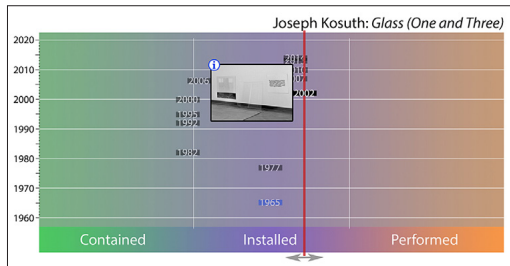
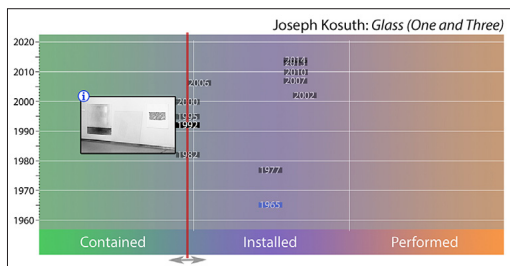
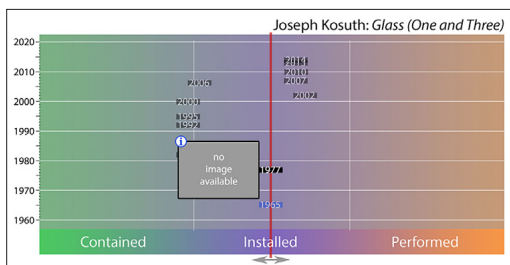
explore whether certain artworks can survive independent of their initial material or technical support (Depocas et al. 2003).³ For instance, an artwork is ‘contained’ when its expression lies within its own material form, as in traditional paintings or sculptures. This category generally requires a conservation strategy based on preserving the original materials. Work has an ‘installed’ behaviour when it is composed of parts that need to be put together behind the scenes before the work can be displayed. Installed work may require the replacement of parts, depending on what they represent for the work, and may allow for variation. ‘Performed’ work is always made anew and generally allows for variation. A performed work requires front-stage action in the gallery to make it manifest. The variable media approach is an important step beyond the material fixation of conservation as it addresses the performative side of contemporary artworks.

The behaviour index combines the idea of attributing behaviour with the idea of a cultural biography, which considers the work’s life story in order to determine its identity (van de Vall et al. 2011). This approach accepts that art changes over time and provides insight into the socio-cultural background that may affect the artwork. However, whereas this approach accommodates features such as change being part of an artwork, it does not solve the conservator’s dilemmas. Rather, it integrates them as part of the work’s trajectory, affecting the next phase in the artwork’s life. Therefore, the biographical approach cannot provide answers, as it is not normative. It is a tool to analyse the past and to locate possible outside forces, but in the end there is always a decision to be made.

This is where the third theoretical framework comes in: the autoethnographic approach. Inspired by researchers from outside the field of conservation using ethnographic research methods to assess the process of conservation and installation of artworks (Yaneva 2003a and 2003b, Van Saaze 2013), *autoethnography* has been proposed as an approach that involves questioning one’s own practice in relation to an artwork under investigation to reveal the mechanisms at play in decision making (Stigter 2016a and 2016b).⁴ It not only allows for critical reflection in retrospect, but also for a reflexive approach when assessing the actual moment of conservation in practice. This inherent reflection allows for strategic action and the development of tactics during the process of intervention itself. Moreover, an autoethnographic approach enforces accountability between one conservator and the next, handing down the reflection that is needed in art conservation.

BEHAVIOUR INDEX

Following a biographical approach of attributing a certain behaviour to each manifestation of a complex artwork reveals that a work’s behaviour is not necessarily a fixed given but depends on the way the work is presented. An artwork’s behaviour may vary over time and even shift between ‘contained’, ‘installed’ and ‘performed’, indicating potential fundamental changes. In such situations, the question arises as to whether the artwork was correctly installed – and well conserved.⁵ Thus, compiling a behaviour index for complex artworks can be a valuable tool for decision making as it allows for normativity.



Figures 1 a–e. Behaviour index for Ger van Elk's *The wider the flatter* (1972): a–d) past life, e) possible future. Kröller-Müller Museum collection. Images: Wiel's Simple Solutions

The behaviour of an artwork's manifestations over time can be pictured on a sliding scale, starting with the most material-based approach for contained behaviour on the left, via installed in the middle, to performed on the right as the least material-based approach. The scale slides continuously through each phase, allowing for fine-tuning within each zone. As on a slider bar, each manifestation of the artwork can be positioned on the behaviour scale, depending on how it is presented. When crossing boundaries between behaviours, the work shifts in ontological status, as the behaviour index for two previously researched case studies illustrates below.

Example 1: Ontological shift

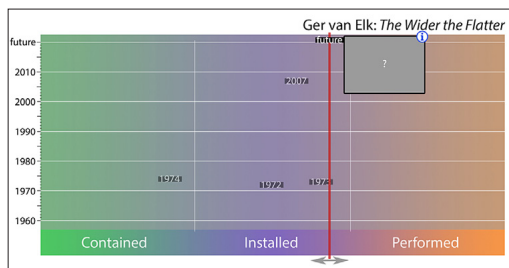
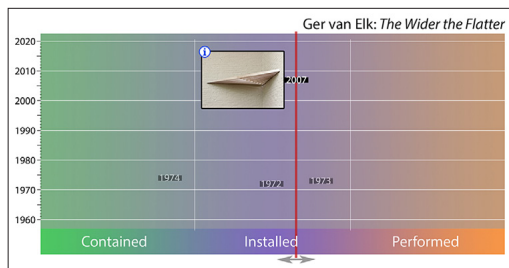
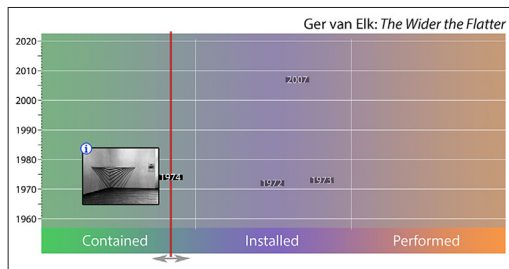
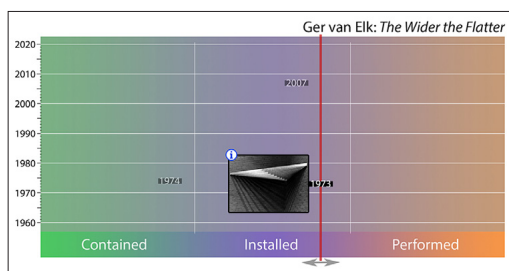
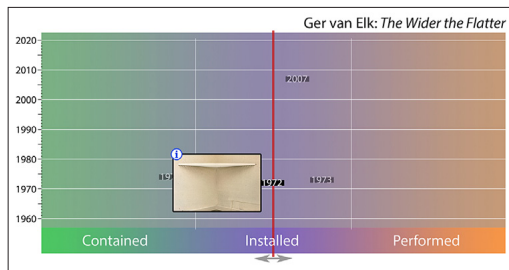
The history of Joseph Kosuth's *Glass (one and three)* (1965) demonstrates a shift from installed behaviour, when it was first materialised at the first owner's home (1977), to contained when entering the Kröller-Müller Museum (1982), and then to installed again during a loan to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2002) (Figures 1 a–c). This is because the photograph in this conceptual artwork, consisting of a sheet of glass leaning against the wall accompanied by its image and its textual definition, has to be made in situ, relating the work to its surroundings. This relation was lost when the museum installed the work using its initial components. It was only when the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam created a new photograph that related to the site that this changed.

This shift is regarded as a more performative moment compared to the work's first materialised form as its relation to the site was the logical result of making the work for the first time. Moreover, at the Stedelijk Museum, the new photographic materials stood out and differed from the text panel. After the international research project *Inside Installations*, the Kröller-Müller Museum also adopted the strategy of renewing the photograph (Stigter 2011). Care was taken to create a similar look and feel as the initial photograph and the text panel, opting for analogue photography, fibre-based paper and a comparable mounting. Considering the choice of more traditional materials, this iteration is situated a little bit more towards the middle of the installed behaviour spectrum compared to 2002, but a little more to the right compared to the first manifestation (Figure 1d). The museum continued this practice of renewing the photograph when installing the artwork.

An interesting moment may arise when the original glass object accidentally breaks some day, or when the gelatine printing process and the fibre-based paper become obsolete. It is likely that the object will be replaced and that different photographic material will be used to make the work manifest. Perhaps, if inkjet printing is used, a life-size representation of the object may be opted for, as this allows for enlargement of the image. This would mean a shift towards the performed end of the spectrum, away from all of the initial material features of the conceptual artwork (Figure 1e).

Example 2: Site-specific?

The history of Van Elk's *The wider the flatter* (1972) reveals a similar ontological shift early on in its career. Like Kosuth's work, this is a site-related artwork, but a one-part object made to fit in a corner. It consists



Figures 2 a–e. Behaviour index for Joseph Kosuth's *Glass (one and three)* (1965): a–d) past life, e) possible future. Kröller-Müller Museum collection. Images: Wiel's Simple Solutions

of photographs adhered to a metal structure that show the exact spot that the sculpture is placed in front of. The idea is that the artwork replaces reality, while visually unfolding the actual museum corner until it is flat. The work was first made for an exhibition in the Van Abbemuseum (1972) and then adapted when it entered the Kröller-Müller Museum collection (1973), demonstrating a performative installed character (Figures 2 a–b). However, when shortly after that the photo-sculpture was loaned for an exhibition to the Stedelijk Museum (1974), the photographs were not replaced. Therefore, the work lacked the intended site-related property. Having lost its installed feature, it crossed over to the contained zone of the behaviour spectrum (Figure 2c). After the loan, the sculpture was placed back in its corner of the Kröller-Müller Museum and never lent out again.

In 2007, a conservation treatment was carried out based on the work's well-known site at the Kröller-Müller Museum (Stigter 2009). This may be considered a more traditional approach, as if ignoring the work's potential mobility. Therefore, this manifestation is situated slightly more towards contained behaviour compared to when it first entered the museum, ascribing the work almost a *site-specific* rather than a *site-related* character (Figure 2d).

The feature of site-relatedness allows for installation of the work elsewhere, so long as its appearance is adapted to match its surroundings. If someone considers this potential flexibility more important and feels the need to 'activate' it, then a new site could be chosen and the photographs replaced. This would cause the work to shift towards the more performed side of the installed zone (Figure 2e). Such a situation would at least become topical when the current site disappears, which necessarily frees up the work from its historical setting.

While this more performative approach could be an option, the decision was made to honour historical and contextual values since the site was still there. This was possible without negating the site-related feature as a work-defining property. Nothing was lost as a result of this strategy. It did not fundamentally change the work's behaviour – no boundaries were crossed. On the contrary, a lot has been preserved and regained: historical values, contextual values and the conceptual idea.

Interpretation

Both case studies demonstrate that an artwork's behaviour is not necessarily an inherent feature, but depends partly on outside forces: the interpretation of the professionals involved and the strategy chosen to install the work. It is the *interpretation* of an artwork's condition at a certain time and place that determines decision making, rather than the condition of the work itself. Hence, a shift in behaviour is always the result of the choices made for reasons that require clear articulation. Such shifts may later be considered 'bad practice' and can be 'corrected' after reassessment.

Jumping an entire zone between two separate behaviours indicates a serious ontological change in an artwork. For instance, when a performance ends up in an art collection as a relic, either in the form of a prop that was used

or as a photograph recording the action, this can never be presented as the artwork itself. Although such paraphernalia may activate an audience's recollection of the performance or fire a visitor's imagination, they merely illustrate the work as an archival document. When these contained items are mistaken for the artwork, something has gone seriously wrong with the interpretation of the collected data.

DATA IN MOTION

The general idea behind the behaviour index is that a work's behaviour is not so much inherent to the artwork's character, but the latter is determined by the decisions of museum professionals. It all depends on their understanding of the work influenced by associated values. Such processes are normally not captured in a collection database, which is generally designed to store data passively. The model of a behaviour index is designed the other way around. It considers the *use* of these data as an active process to unfold ideas about the artwork, influencing the artwork in turn.

Users, such as conservators and curators, set information in motion when they interpret an artwork, defining what the work should express and deciding on ways to make this manifest. It is this notion that forms the basis of the idea to situate an artwork on a slider bar that can shift a little within behaviour zones through time. When an artwork enters a different zone, alarm bells should ring. Thus, the model encourages reflection and enforces accountability on those who are able to fine-tune the work's behaviour. The aim, therefore, is to develop a digital tool for museum collection management that can be used as an interactive instrument by museum professionals when deciding on the appearance of artworks put on display. The person who is responsible for decision making has to set the slider bar according to the expected result of a chosen strategy. This makes one aware of one's personal input in the new chapter of the work's biography, enforcing accountability in decision-making. Furthermore, the behaviour index suggests that someone is turning the dials and that this can be adjusted as in a dynamic system.

CONCLUSION

The behaviour index for complex artworks provides insight into the way museum professionals turn the dials with regard to an artwork's manifestation when put on display. It is not the artwork itself, but the way it is interpreted and installed that determines this course of action. Using the behaviour index for complex artworks may reveal shifts in a work's ontological status, which makes it a valuable instrument for decision making in conservation and an enrichment of the biographical approach. The structuring principle of the behaviour index provides an intellectual tool to enforce accountability on future conservators when becoming part of decisive moments in the lives of complex artworks. As museum professionals largely determine the way variable artworks are perpetuated, the model highlights their personal input as a dynamic feature in a collection management system, opening-up the static nature of a database and facilitating process-based research in conservation studies.

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NOTES

- ¹ The idea for a behaviour index for complex artworks is based on the author's thesis (Stigter 2016b).
- ² This tool will be developed with support from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research through the Creative industry – Knowledge Innovation Mapping (KIEM) programme under the research project DIAL for Complex Artworks: Digital Index of an Artwork's Life (2017–2018) (<https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/48/28848.html>, accessed 30 June 2017).
- ³ The *Variable Media Initiative* (1999–2001) was a collaborative research project by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Daniel Langlois Foundation. See www.guggenheim.org/conservation/the-variable-media-initiative. It resulted in an exhibition, a publication and a website explaining the approach: www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html (accessed 17 November 2016).
- ⁴ Conservator Glenn Wharton also uses ethnographic research methods and turned to participatory action research when involving the community in his conservation project (Wharton 2012, 2014).
- ⁵ I consider a correct installation an important part of the conservation of complex artworks.

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