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## THE ARTIST INTERVIEW AS A PLATFORM FOR NEGOTIATING AN ARTWORK'S POSSIBLE FUTURES

In the 1990s, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, a chief conservator at the Menil Collection, started to interview artists in order to gather information about collected artworks for the sake of potential future conservation treatment. Initially, the interviews were expected to inform caretakers at the Menil about the approach of an artist towards preservation and to provide conservators with information on materials and techniques used for the creation of an artwork. This marked the beginning of the pioneering Artists Documentation Program, the first project in which artists were invited by an art institution to dialogue on the future of their work.<sup>1</sup> Following the steps of Mancusi-Ungaro, in the second half of the nineties another initiative was established, this time in the Netherlands. Within the ground-breaking research project *Modern Art: Who cares?*, the artist's participation in preservation of contemporary art was discussed at length.<sup>2</sup> Both the project and the resulting international symposium had a major impact on the field of modern and contemporary art conservation, and became an inspiration for further research initiatives, like Artists' Interviews and Artists' Interviews / Artists' Archives, carried out in the Netherlands between 1998 and 2005 by the SBMK.<sup>3</sup> 1999 saw the establishment of INCCA, a platform designed to collect, share and preserve knowledge valuable for the conservation of contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this initiative was twofold: firstly, to develop guidelines for interviewing artists, and secondly, to build a website allowing for the exchange of professional information and knowledge about contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> In the first year after the INCCA's foundation, its members, both conservators and curators, conducted about fifty interviews with artists.<sup>6</sup> This experience helped to develop the *INCCA Guide to Good Practice: Artists' Interviews*.<sup>7</sup> Since that time the artist interview has been acknowledged within the conservation field and implemented in practice. Various publications on the subject have advanced interviewing techniques, provided examples of its application and proved its value for designing conservation strategies.<sup>8</sup>

There is no single common explanation in the literature of what an artist interview really is, and the intuitive answer to this question can be misleading. Although all definitions of the word 'interview' in the online Oxford Dictionary of English refer to oral interaction, the conservation-related concept embraces different

types of communication like letters and questionnaires.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in this research the artist interview is a concept even more distanced from the original meaning of the word. Using as a point of departure the definition of ‘oral history’ proposed by Abrams (2010), who describes it as “both a research methodology (...) and the result of the research process,” I define the artist interview as a process consisting of the preparatory research, the encounter(s) and the post-production (transcript, annotations and analysis). In this context, the interview as such is framed as a semi-structured, guided conversation, where the interviewer plays the role of a guide.<sup>10</sup> Such a description associates this kind of interview with what is defined in the conservation field as an ‘extended interview’, which provides the opportunity to explore deeper layers of information.<sup>11</sup>

The various sections of this article will provide an overview of the steps of the artist interview as described above, together with an analysis and reflection on how data gathered during the preparatory phase shape expectations, and the actual course of the encounter. Additionally, the reconstructed history of the musealisation of Barbara Kruger’s piece provides grounds for a reflection on how the way this process unfolds can shape the future of a contemporary artwork.

The research described in this paper was carried out during a five-month fellowship in the largest modern and contemporary art museum in the Netherlands, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (SMA). Having the status of collection researcher, with all the privileges of a museum employee, allowed for the efficient application of various ethnographic research methods and the exploration of the museum’s archives. From the outset, I was assigned a specific task related to Kruger’s 2010 *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*, a spatial installation from the SMA’s collection. Challenges that the work presented for its institutional keeper resulted mainly from its conceptual nature, and were connected to its future display and status within the collection. The main goal of my mission was to gather and analyse existing documentation on the artwork, to interview the artist about the future of the piece, and finally to recommend preservation measures.<sup>12</sup>

## Setting and background

The story of Kruger’s piece starts in 2010, during the directorship of Ann Goldstein, a renowned American curator, the first woman and non-Dutch person in this position. In 2010, the SMA, located on Amsterdam’s Museumplein, had been closed to museumgoers for six years due to delays in the construction works on its new building. There was extreme pressure, both from the public as well as financing bodies, for the museum management to take action in order to improve the image and visibility of the institution, and solving this problem became one of the main tasks of the newly appointed director.<sup>13</sup> Although the new building remained unfinished, the renovation of the old one had reached completion months before. Goldstein chose to explore this opportunity and use the latter as a provisional venue. *The Temporary Stedelijk: Taking place* was planned as a show which would welcome visitors back ‘home’ to the SMA.<sup>14</sup> Since the exhibition was designed to take advantage of the temporary nature of the situation, artists were invited to make site-specific works for the gallery spaces, and this ‘site-specificity’ became a trademark of the project. Most of the works presented had a conceptual character, which, aside from the fact that conceptual art was one of the new director’s main areas of expertise, also had a more practical motivation. As the museum’s infrastructure was still unfinished and the galleries did not meet exhibition standards, the presentation of vulnerable objects would not have been possible due to conservation requirements.<sup>15</sup> One of the artists invited to the show was Barbara Kruger, who has a long common professional history with Goldstein.<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of the exhibition, Kruger designed a temporary immersive installation for the Stedelijk’s Erezaal (Hall of Honour),

the main gallery of the old building. The location was not coincidental – an intervention by a female artist in a space with a long history of male dominance was a significant gesture.<sup>17</sup>

The commissioned artwork, *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*, 2010 is an example of one of Kruger's 'wall-wraps'. This term is borrowed from advertising, where it describes large-scale prints covering walls and/or floors in public spaces like airports or shopping centres. In the case of the Stedelijk installation, all walls and the floor were covered by words printed in capital letters, in Kruger's characteristic Helvetica typeface (Figure 1-2). The size of the letters was adapted to the specificity of the space by entirely filling the area, and the only colours used were black and white. Because of the messages' immense size, in order to read the content of the work it was necessary to wander across it. The text is a combination of sentences written in English and Dutch, most of them authored by the artist, while others are quotes from other writers, such as Orwell and Barthes. As Dziewior once remarked, Kruger's text combinations "in fact frequently make too much sense, that is, they enable multiple levels of interpretation and association, generating forms hindering the easy consumption that is existent in advertising".<sup>18</sup> Therefore the basic, personal interpretation of the Stedelijk piece can be made as an emotional and/or intellectual reading of separate messages as well as the discovery of relations between them. The key features are the directness in addressing the viewer, and the sheer scale of the text. However, as I will argue below, further study of both the artist's practice and the context of the wall-wraps' creation will allow for a different, more complex reading of the Stedelijk piece.

To conclude this description, it is important to mention the physical characteristics of the installation, which, from a technical point of view, consisted of a digital print on vinyl film stuck directly to the walls and floor of the gallery space. The basis for the print was a design created by the artist which was then produced as a digital vector file by the studio that has worked with Kruger on her spatial installations for many years. Because wall-wraps are transient by nature, after each show the printed vinyl is removed from the architectural surfaces and destroyed.

Two years later, in 2012, the construction works in the museum were nearly complete, and the preparations for the inauguration of the new building started to gain speed. The first event planned for the 1100-square-meter gallery in the basement of the new wing was an exhibition titled *Works in place*, which addressed the way contemporary artists make use of architectural space in their work.<sup>19</sup> It was announced as a presentation of the collection and Kruger's piece was planned to be installed again. However, at that point the need to regulate its status became urgent, as Goldstein wanted to show it as a recent acquisition: "it is critical that the work is purchased and acquired by the time of our reopening so that it is presented as one of the collection works".<sup>20</sup> The musealisation of the artwork, which in this case was related to its conversion from a temporary installation using the museum as a space to part of the museum collection, started with the purchase, which came to an end in mid-August ahead of the show's opening at the end of September. The new manifestation of the artwork was radically different from the previous one (Figure 3-4).<sup>21</sup> This time it was arranged in the lower-level gallery around a pavilion built exclusively for the purpose of the show, and the words occupied the floor and the external walls of the space. While there were several new phrases added, the major difference was the employment of a third colour – green. During the acquisition an oral agreement was made between the artist and Goldstein that Kruger would provide three alternative installation options, "including an adaptation of the original version for the Erezaal (which now will incorporate the two additional doorways) and for one other smaller space like one of the large interior rooms".<sup>22</sup> Ann Goldstein resigned as director in December 2013,<sup>23</sup> as of which time none of aforementioned adaptations had been delivered.

In 2016 the museum staff started to work on the redesign of the permanent exhibition and the reinstalation of *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)* was again taken into consideration. The new location, a space on the mezzanine containing the entrance to the auditorium, was proposed by curators and accepted by the artist, whereupon it once again became urgent to resolve tasks related to Kruger's piece. In preparation for the installation of this third and supposedly final manifestation, the museum requested that the artist produce the modified drawings agreed upon under Goldstein but which had not been delivered, as well as installation instructions, a certificate of authenticity, and guidelines regarding the future of the work. As details of the agreement between the artist and the former director were never recorded on paper, it was ultimately decided that the best way to collect the missing information about the uncertain future of the piece once all agreed versions had been executed was to conduct an interview with the artist. As these circumstances coincided with the beginning of my fieldwork at the SMA, I was assigned the task of compiling existing documentation on the artwork and preparing the interview.

## Unpacking the nature of the artwork

Preparatory research is certainly one of main challenges of interviewing, and at the same time a firm foundation that allows the interviewer to pose appropriate questions and interpret the participant's answers. In the museum framework this challenge is conditioned by the time and skills required to accomplish the task. Although the aforementioned *Guide to Good Practice* recommends close collaboration with a curator or art historian, in everyday museum practice this advice is usually difficult to follow due to the internal institutional dynamics and notorious work overload.<sup>24</sup> The responsibilities of curators in modern and contemporary art museums has shifted in recent decades from collection-focused to exhibition-focused, and so the process of artwork documentation has been passed on almost completely to registrars and conservators.<sup>25</sup> At the SMA this gap was filled by a team of researchers, art historians who are regularly involved in conservation-related investigation. However, during recent rearrangements of the museum's structure this unit has been reassigned from the section responsible for collection to the one in charge of curatorial concerns. As a result, priorities have changed, and most of researchers' work has shifted its focus to exhibition-making. Nevertheless, having the time, means and willingness to fully analyse the implications of the interview process as defined at the beginning of this text, I decided to face the challenge alone.

The first step of the investigation was to learn about the status of the piece from the SMA collection within the context of Kruger's artistic practice. For this purpose, as well as to analyse the development of immersive installations as a medium, a complete list of wall-wraps by Kruger was created, based on a survey of the available literature. The beginning of immersive, site-specific installations in Kruger's oeuvre dates back to the end of the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Over the following three decades Kruger created more than 40 installations in various types of interiors, covering their walls, floors, and occasionally ceilings with words.<sup>27</sup> In the first decade, the text was almost always complemented by black and white images, and in many cases it contained direct quotes from Kruger's older, formally more traditional pieces, amplified and often cropped differently. This self-appropriation also extends to fragments of texts, both the artist's own writings as well as numerous quotes from other authors.<sup>28</sup> During this period the predominant colours are black, white and red, which are characteristic of Kruger's oeuvre in general.

Although Kruger associates her first experiments of filling spaces with words and imagery with her interest in architecture, in various interviews the artist has stressed the fact that in contrast to architects, she never

works with drawings or models.<sup>29</sup> Her method is much more intuitive: “I walk into a space and pretty much know how I’m going to engage it”;<sup>30</sup> “I can walk into a space and pretty much know immediately ... how I think things will play out”.<sup>31</sup>

One of the aims of preparing a detailed list of all Kruger’s wall-wraps was to understand whether the artist considered these installations from the outset as autonomous artworks. In this context, by autonomous I mean a work that had been conceived as a fixed ‘art object’. In Kruger’s case, an example of such works would be formally more traditional pieces, for instance prints designed to be hung on a wall, framed in characteristic red frames. This issue was addressed by tracing the development of the room-wraps’ titles through the history of their exhibitions. The research was built upon the assumption that an autonomous artwork would be assigned a title. This ultimately turned out to be a rather challenging task, as not all artworks are always listed in a show’s description. Nevertheless, based on this investigation it was possible to conclude that, at least in the beginning, room installations were not titled, but rather were referred to under the general name of an exhibition. That is the case of the iconic work presented at Mary Boone Gallery in New York in 1991, which lacks a title in all of the reviews encountered during the investigation.<sup>32</sup> An actual title is assigned to a wall-wrap for the first time in 1994, and this fact is directly related to the musealisation of one of the installations by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.<sup>33</sup> Outside of the collection context, a title appears in relation to the installation commissioned by Stockholm’s Moderna Museet (2008). However, the 2008 installation *Untitled (Between being born and dying)* adopted as a title the name of the whole show. Interestingly, the room-wrap shown the following year in the Lever House Art Collection in New York was given the same name as the one presented in Stockholm; however, this time the first part, the word “Untitled”, had been removed.<sup>34</sup> Since that time the wall-wraps have been given independent titles that differ from the names of the exhibitions in which they appear.<sup>35</sup>

The study of the titles, together with other features of Kruger’s oeuvre as a whole, allowed for the supposition that wall-wraps, even those commissioned and/or later acquired by art institutions, were at first designed as temporary interventions. To understand their character in depth, it is necessary adopt a broader perspective and look at room installations as a practice which emerged in parallel to Kruger’s politically and socially engaged projects in public spaces. In the context of the artist’s common employment of mediums such as billboards, advertisement-like wall compositions, stickers on urban buses or posters in bus shelters, the wall-wraps are just another way of intervening, although in this case mostly inside art-related spaces, namely galleries and museums. An example which links these two apparently divergent concepts are installations designed for museum lobbies, like the one at the Hirshhorn Museum.<sup>36</sup> Also worthy of note are those executed directly in public spaces, like the project *Empatía*, in which Kruger covered the walls and ceilings of Mexico City’s metro station with words.<sup>37</sup>

The study of Kruger’s oeuvre allowed for a basic understanding of the artist’s ideas and methodology behind her room installations. Yet, one of the issues left to be addressed was their idiosyncrasies in terms of the site-specificity, material-specificity and relation to a particular historical moment – concepts which are crucial for consideration of an artwork’s possible futures. My analysis of the sentences employed in the piece relied on the advice of the artist herself, who has often emphasised that “no one needs a PhD in conceptual art to understand my work”.<sup>38</sup> After translating the parts written in Dutch I found most of the sentences familiar, as Kruger repeats them continuously in other works – room installations, videos, as well as formally more traditional ‘hanging’ pieces. Characteristic and powerful quotes from Barthes and Orwell (e.g. “All violence

is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype”) are combined with short phrases directed to an undefined ‘you’ (e.g. “please laugh”). The only element which recalls the geographical location of the installation is the use of Dutch. Accordingly, the site-specificity of the piece can be understood merely in terms of the actual relationship between the dimensions of the artwork and the particular architectural space. It is not related to the Stedelijk Museum, to Amsterdam as a geographical location, or to idiosyncrasies of Dutch culture, and as such it seems that it can be adapted to any other architectural space which meets the right conditions in terms of dimensions, even outside the SMA’s walls.

The next issue to analyse was material specificity, understood as the rigid bond between the materials employed and the reading of the work. As there were no physical samples of the artwork’s material presence kept by the museum, the issue of material specificity required a trustworthy source of information. Both instantiations of *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)* were produced by the same printing lab, Omnimark. Therefore, interviewing the company’s project manager, Hwie-Bing Kwee, who coordinated the process in both instances, seemed to be the best option.<sup>39</sup>

In 2010, when the artist was invited by the SMA for the first collaboration, Kruger had already been working comfortably with digital printing for almost a decade. She typically executes her wall wraps in commercial printing labs that work with different types of printing techniques on vinyl film. It is important to mention that this was not the case in the very earliest of Kruger’s immersive room installations. Her first wall-wraps were screen-printed on paper and/or vinyl and then stuck to the walls in pieces.<sup>40</sup> There is a documented case of an installation originally printed in this traditional technique and later reprinted digitally.<sup>41</sup> However, both instantiations of the Stedelijk piece were produced in a similar manner.

According to Kwee’s account, the artist assisted in the installation of the piece and took an active part in changing the original design to adapt it more precisely to circumstances encountered in-situ.<sup>42</sup> With the help of a technician from Omnimark, the artist altered previous drawings to account for the empty spaces in the walls. Both versions were executed as a UV-cured print on PVC self-adhesive film, laminated with a matte coating. Wall and floor graphics in both instances were printed in panels whose size depended on the capacity of the printing machine and the available width of the PVC film rolls. In both cases, the rolls of film employed were of the same width; however, while in 2010 the wall graphics were divided into vertical panels, in 2012 they were printed on horizontal panels which were split into two parts, resulting in a horizontal joint at mid-height. As the panels were precision-cut on the digital cutting table, the joints were barely visible. However, there are many ways to make this division: it can be performed mechanically according to the width of the roll, or in a more careful, precise way by hiding the joints between the letters to make them even less perceptible. The choice of method, which obviously affects the production budget, was consulted with the artist:

I was a little bit worried about the panelling. But she loved the panelling because she said [...] I want to be recognized like a graffiti artists. Don’t make it invisible, make it visible. So with the floor, if you have the panels’ seams – she loves the way you could recognize the panels, it is her way of being a graffiti artist.<sup>43</sup>

## Wrapping up the research stage

After analysing the gathered data, I came to understand that the artwork's musealisation process had been influenced by the special circumstances in which the piece was commissioned and later included in the collection, namely the transitional moment for the institution during the delayed construction of the new building. Furthermore, the bond between the artist and the director played an important role; this relationship of trust allowed arrangements to be made quickly, as required by the fast pace of the art show's preparation and planning.

Nevertheless, the research described in this article could prove that the current artwork's status may not allow for its future continuity to be ensured, at least not in its initial form as an immersive room installation. It can be preserved in other ways, e.g. as documentation or by means of re-creation or re-enactment. However, I assumed that the aspiration of the institution would be to preserve it as closely as possible to the initial state as intended by the artist, which in this case includes immersiveness as one of its key features. Although after the execution of its third instantiation, *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)* could be, in theory, reinstalled following any of its past manifestations, in practice this would not be an easy task. The architecture of the first location has changed since then, and the artist would have to adapt the initial design to the new situation. The second manifestation was bound to the design of the temporary exhibition, and in order to repeat the architectural context the pavilion would have to be rebuilt. However, to complicate matters, the lower gallery recently underwent a renovation that included the construction of movable partitions. These two examples triggered a reflection on architecture as a support or medium which can become obsolete, similarly to hardware in the case of technology-based art. Certainly, spaces can be reconstructed by creating life-size models, but as I will argue later, such an approach seems to go against the wall-wrap's nature.

The study of Kruger's artistic practice related to room-installations led to the conclusion that the wall-wraps were not intended to be permanent, but rather that they are intrinsically ephemeral and temporary. The main goal of this practice was to increase the impact of the messages used by the artist in her more traditional pieces meant to be hung on walls, which is why her installations combine elements from older works. The changeability of the piece is directly related to the idea of the 'intervention' and the 'occupation of space', and therefore its character evokes other forms of art occurring in public spaces, for instance graffiti art. Moreover, following this line of thought, a wall-wrap recreated in the same space over and over again would give up an important part of the 'freshness' inherent to the idea of artistic intervention, and the artistic gesture would lose a part of its authenticity. Additionally, to my current knowledge, none of the wall-wraps has been reinstalled so far without changing its location. Based on the in-depth analysis of issues related to both past executions of the piece at the SMA, it is safe to conclude that the materials employed should not be considered as significant. Since the artist was continuously adapting her technique to the available technical possibilities, such an approach can likewise be employed in the future under certain conditions.<sup>44</sup>

At this stage of the investigation, my understanding of *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)* was that of a set of components which, following certain rules or constraints, can be employed in infinite combinations.<sup>45</sup> This observation was made with the assumption that the limitation to three manifestations is not a meaningful condition for reading the artwork, but more a practical provision which helps to limit the artist's involvement in the 'adult' life of her works.<sup>46</sup> As such, following Goodman's distinction used in the field of contemporary art conservation, the artwork can be classified as allographic rather than autographic, which opens up the possibility of 're-performing' it in the future.<sup>47</sup> What was certainly lacking in order to open up this option

was a 'score' or 'script' which could guide the artwork's future realisations. After analysing the history of the artwork's metamorphosis throughout its consecutive instantiations, I started to consider the possibility of proposing the creation of guidelines or instructions enabling future adaptation of the piece to other spaces, following Kruger's way of thinking about the relations between the words and the particular space. This solution would require a precise specification of the features which tie together the separate elements of the installation and make them function as a coherent piece.

Would it be possible, by applying the Variable Media Paradigm, to invite the artist to define her work "independently from the medium", understanding 'the medium' to mean the walls and floors of particular spaces within the Stedelijk Museum?<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, the design of this kind of instructions would require close collaboration with the artist and her willingness to grant a part of the control over the final result to the artwork's institutional keeper. At this stage, the time had finally come to approach the artist herself.

## The encounter

While the interview's main and stated aim was to establish a preservation strategy for Kruger's wall-wraps in the framework of the museum's collection, a second, covert goal was to assess the possibility of negotiating the future of the artwork, and to test the efficiency of the interview as a means to achieve this goal. The in-depth research into Kruger's artistic practice allowed for a precise design of the interview's script, which was divided into several blocks of questions. The first one addressed Kruger's general approach to wall-wraps as a distinct genre in her oeuvre. Issues related to the history and development of room installations, her creative process, and her artistic practice were intended to be discussed in this part. Although the initial research had provided most of the answers, the goal of posing these questions was to juxtapose the information encountered in written sources with a more personal account. The second block was related to the musealisation of wall-wraps and Kruger's approach to their consecutive adaptations to various spaces. The third block started with rather direct questions addressing preservation problems of wall-wraps from museum collections. Although Concept Scenario Artists' Interviews, as well as many practitioners, advise against posing straightforward questions related to possible conservation solutions, in this case it was difficult to avoid.

I decided to open up a space for a reflective answer by asking Kruger to imagine possible futures of the piece from the SMA's collection, and to let her develop her own ideas. The latter, conservation-related part ended with the key question addressing the possibility of writing installation instructions to allow for future adaptations of the wall-wraps to different spaces without the artist's involvement. The rest of the script was divided into two blocks to be applied according to Kruger's reaction to raising this possibility. One elaborated on the subject with detailed queries, while the other, more focused on practical details related to the display of the work, was meant to release any tension if the artist had a negative reaction to the proposal.

The meeting took place in a location proposed by the artist, a café in Greenwich Village. Only after listening to the recording of the meeting did I realise the importance of the Oral History Society's advice on choosing the interview site: "Unless part of the ... process includes gathering soundscapes, historically significant sound events, or ambient noise, the interview should be conducted in a quiet room with minimal background noises and possible distractions."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the problem was not only that the noise of the coffee maker rendered entire utterances inaudible in the recording, but also that in the interview itself the participant and I at

times had trouble understanding one another. Indeed, I had not taken into account the language difference; Kruger speaks American English, which I am not familiar with. Meanwhile, I speak 'international' English, with a fair share of borrowed constructions and expressions, combined with a foreign accent. The presence of constant background noise caused multiple misinterpretations of particular words. This, together with the specificity of Kruger's digressive way of constructing her narrative, severely affected the course of the interview. The general feeling was that the aim of specific questions was not transparent to the artist and therefore her responses to the queries were neither clear nor direct. In order to obtain concrete information I had to return to the same question over and over again. Understandably, the flow of the dialogue forced us to stray from the script. At one point I became so desperate to 'save' the interview that I started to interrupt the artist's digressions with queries. The conversation was quite dense. After the first hour, I felt that both of us were already tired, and I became aware that we were running out of time. The interview's transcript reveals how, at a certain point, I grew impatient and forced the question regarding the possibility of re-installing wall-wraps without the artist's involvement.

AW: We have this piece in the collection and they [future museum curators] will reinstall it in 100 years in some way, and the whole idea of our conversation is to collect your thoughts about how to do it in the future, as close to how you would like to have it as possible. What would be your vision then?

BK: I don't want the text to change. I don't want the image to change. I mean - who is going to that?

AW: But two of the pieces have already changed ... we have at least two different variations ... the text changed ...

BK: I've changed the text. But if I am not around ...

AW: You don't want anybody to change it.

BK: Who is going to change the text? The meaning?? The words?? No!<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusions

By following the consecutive steps of the artist interview, this article has aimed to determine whether such interviews can be used as a tool in the negotiation and common planning of an artwork's possible futures. The analysis of the practice and the information gathered allowed for partial confirmation of this assumption, and for the establishment of a framework in which this tool could be a valuable asset. The first important outcome of the artist interview as a process is the documentation of the artwork, gathered and organised both in the preparatory phase and during the encounter. This documentation allows the piece to be understood from multiple angles, and serves as a potential basis for any future activities related to the artwork. The encounter itself proved no less valuable, as the conversation with the artist made it possible to confirm certain assumptions and discard others. During the interview, Kruger took a firm stance regarding further adaptations of the Stedelijk piece, explaining her approach to the continuity of the work and providing a clear reference for future decision-makers. Moreover, the conversation brought up new practical information that will prove useful in planning how her work is displayed in the future. For instance, Kruger discussed her approach to dating her own work, as well as to translating her work's linguistic content from various languages. Furthermore, in my opinion, the interview raised the artist's awareness regarding issues related to the preservation of spatial installations, which opened up the possibility for a continuation of the dialogue. At one point in the conversation, Kruger openly expressed her scepticism towards the proposed documentation strategy that includes the artist's opinion. When I recalled once again one of the goals of our meeting, by explaining that recording the artist's view on the future of the artwork may prevent its keepers from altering its meaning and doing "whatever they want", she

responded with a shrug: “But they will do it anyway!”<sup>51</sup> This statement indicates that Kruger is aware of certain consequences of the musealisation of her intrinsically temporary piece, which makes a good starting point for follow-up. On a practical level, the encounter made it possible to complete the recommendations to the SMA regarding the preservation strategy for *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*, which without the artist’s opinion would be based on mere speculation.

However, the critical reflection on the course of the process described in this article also led to the conclusion that in the museum context, the artist interview can easily turn from a tool designed for documentation into the one which serves a certain instrumentalisation of the artist. In many cases, this problem is reflected in the way the concept of artist interview is approached, by literally using it as a ‘tool’ to obtain useful information. Yet, this instrumentalisation can have different dimensions, and in fact could easily be used to describe my own practice of documenting the piece by Kruger. I approached the artist with the preconception that the artwork was a conceptual piece that could be fixed by a set of instructions, and to a certain extent I was expecting the artist to validate this line of thinking.

How can this struggle be avoided? I would argue that artists should be included from the start as partners in museum practices related to acquisition, and should take part in a joint discussion on their artwork’s future life. Certainly, this is not a new idea and there are multiple cases in which the creator has taken an active role in transforming her artwork into a museum object. However, I would advocate for this involvement to be a part of the regular museum acquisition workflow. This can be done by incorporating artist interviews, together with preliminary research, into the standard acquisition procedure. Of course, the importance of engaging in dialogue with the artist when the work enters the collection is broadly acknowledged within the field of time-based media conservation, and has also emerged as a necessity in light of the idiosyncrasies of technology-based art. Indeed, the Tate’s Time-Based Media Department website mentions that their employees “conduct detailed interviews with the artist about the work as close to the point of acquisition as possible”;<sup>52</sup> likewise, dialogue with the artist, the so-called ‘intake interview’, is also a part of the Guggenheim’s time-based media conservation practices.<sup>53</sup> Why is this practice not common among the other specialisations of contemporary art conservation? The reason is probably rather simple. Technologies used in art in the recent past are already becoming obsolete, and a lack of careful documentation could make it impossible to actually ‘turn the artwork on’, which in conservation terms would be equal to a ‘total loss’. In the case of contemporary artwork which does not involve technology and is made of more or less stable materials, the importance of the interview may seem less pressing than other priorities of the museum’s everyday work-flow. However, although the artwork described in this paper does not fall within the category of time-based media, we have nevertheless seen how the involvement of the artist is necessary in order to develop a strategy for its preservation. I would also argue that the story of Kruger’s installation would have taken a different path if such a collaboration, in the form of a negotiation, had been in place at the beginning of the artwork’s musealisation process.

Although the task assigned to me by the SMA has come to an end, the issues my experience raise for the work of contemporary art conservators are far from resolved. The central question to be tackled is the extent to which the artist should have a say in the future of her own piece. This time around I was able to pass the burden of answering this question on to future decision-makers. However, to quote a passage from the Kundera book whose title inspired the name of this volume, we might just assume that, like a person, an artwork “has only one life to live and that which occurs in life occurs only once and never again”. Might museums, then, instead of insisting on keeping an artwork forever, one day simply accept its transience?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although there had been earlier initiatives that involved collecting data from artists about their artworks with a focus on conservation, they took the form of a written questionnaire, not an actual interview. Some of the projects with similar aims date back to the beginning of the twentieth century and are described in: Cornelia Weyer and Gunnar Heydenreich, “From Questionnaires to a Checklist for Dialogues,” in *Modern Art: Who Cares?* edited by Ysbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), 385–388. For more information on the Artist Documentation Program, see: “Program History,” accessed 29 June 2017, <http://adp.menil.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Art: Who Cares?* was a project initiated in 1995 by The Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (Dutch abbreviation: SBMK) and The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (from 2011, The Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency), which concluded with an international symposium on the conservation of modern art, held in Amsterdam (8–10 September 1997). The outcomes of the project were published in a book, see: *Modern Art: Who Cares?*

<sup>3</sup> The outcome of both projects was *Concept Scenario. Artists’ Interviews*, a set of guidelines to aid conservators and curators in conducting interviews “that would benefit the conservation of modern and contemporary art”. See: “Concept Scenario Artists’ Interviews,” Amsterdam: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage / Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, 1999, accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.sbm.nl/uploads/concept-scenario.pdf>. International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, see: “About INCCA,” accessed 15 December 2017, <https://www.incca.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> See: “Conservation interviews,” accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/interviews-artists/conservation-interviews>.

<sup>6</sup> See: “Guide to Good Practice: Artists’ Interviews,” 2002, accessed 15 December 2017, [http://www.incca.org/files/pdf/resources/guide\\_to\\_good\\_practice.pdf](http://www.incca.org/files/pdf/resources/guide_to_good_practice.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g.: Lydia Beerkens, Ysbrand Hummelen, Paulien’t Hoen, Vivian van Saaze, Tatja Scholte and Sanneke Stigter, *The Artist Interview. For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art. Guidelines and Practice* (Heyningen: Jap Sam Books, 2012); Vivian van Saaze, “From Intention to Interaction. Reframing the Artist’s Interview in Conservation Research,” in *Art d’aujourd’hui, patrimoine de demain: Conservation et restauration des oeuvres contemporaines: 13es journées d’études de la SFIC (Section Française de l’Institut International de Conservation)* (Paris: Institut National Du Patrimoine, 2009); Sanneke Stigter, “Dynamic Art Technological Sources for Contemporary Works: The Artist Interview and the Installation Process,” in *Making and Transforming Art: Technology and Interpretation: Proceedings of the Fifth Symposium of the ICOM-CC Working Group for Art Technology Source Research*, Hélène Dubois, Joyce H. Townsend, Jilleen Nadolny, Sigrid Eyb-Green, Stefanos Kroustallis and Sylvie Neven, eds. (London: Archetype Publications, 2014), 147–148.

<sup>9</sup> See: “Guide to Good Practice: Artists’ Interviews,” 2002, accessed 15 December 2017, [http://www.incca.org/files/pdf/resources/guide\\_to\\_good\\_practice.pdf](http://www.incca.org/files/pdf/resources/guide_to_good_practice.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Guided conversation’ is a term borrowed from Glenn Wharton, one of main theorists and practitioners in the field, see: Richard McCoy, “Concepts Around Interviewing Artists: A Discussion with Glenn Wharton.” *No Preservatives: Conversations About Conservation, Art 21 Magazine Blog*, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> As the conservation strategy for Kruger’s piece as such is not the main focus of this paper, a detailed description of the final results of this part of the investigation can be consulted in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam’s virtual archive. See: Agnieszka Wielocha, “Report on the state of documentation and recommendations regarding preservation strategy for B. Kruger’s *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*,” 360° SMA’s virtual archive (August 2017).

<sup>13</sup> See: “Ann Goldstein new director Stedelijk Museum - Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam,” 2009, accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news-items/ann-goldstein-new-director-stedelijk-museum>.

<sup>14</sup> Exhibition: *Taking Place*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 28 August 2010 - 9 January 2011. See: “Taking place - Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam,” 2011, accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/taking-place>.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Bart Rutten. (26 September 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Ann Goldstein curated a major retrospective of Kruger’s work at the MOCA in Los Angeles (*Barbara Kruger*, 17 October 1999–13 February 2000) and wrote a series of articles about the artist, e.g.: Ann Goldstein, Rosalyn Deutsche, Katherine Dieckmann, Steven Heller, Gary Indiana, Carol Squiers, and Lynne Tillman, *Barbara Kruger: Thinking of You* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Bart Rutten. (26 September 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Yilmaz Dziewior, "Words on Words," in *Barbara Kruger. Believe + Doubt* (Bregenz: Kunsthau Bregenz, 2014), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Exhibition: *Works in Place*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 23 September - 4 November 2012. See: "Exhibition - Works in Place - Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam," 2012, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/exhibition-works-in-place>.

<sup>20</sup> Email from Ann Goldstein to curators and project managers, 5 August 2012. Retrieved from 360°, SMA's virtual archive.

<sup>21</sup> In conservation literature, 'manifestation', 'installation', 'iteration' and 'instantiation' are used interchangeably to describe the same concept, namely the realisation of the object or event that exemplifies the work of art in time and space. It is important to note, however, that each of these words come from different fields; for example, 'iteration' is adopted from computer science and means "a new version of a piece of computer hardware or software" (Oxford Dictionaries), and therefore is more akin to issues related to technology-based art.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> See: "Ann Goldstein resigns as director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam," 2013, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news-items/ann-goldstein-resigns-as-director-of-the-stedelijk-museum-amsterdam>.

<sup>24</sup> "Guide to Good Practice: Artists' Interviews."

<sup>25</sup> This shift is broadly acknowledged in the field and a set of relevant references can be found in: Bruce Altshuler, "Collecting the New. A Historical Introduction," in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, edited by Bruce Altshuler (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999), 1–9.

<sup>26</sup> Exhibition: *Barbara Kruger*. Chicago: Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1990. "Amongst these early installations was one which opened at Mary Boone in January 1991 and whose predecessors had been on display at the Fred Hoffman, Los Angeles (1989) and Rhona Hoffman, Chicago (1990) galleries." (Yilmaz Dziewior, "Words on Words," in *Barbara Kruger. Believe + Doubt* (Bregenz: Kunsthau Bregenz, 2014), 79.

<sup>27</sup> All wall-wraps exhibited by Kruger have been gathered in the form of a provisional catalogue made for the purpose of this research. This document has been deposited in 360°, SMA's virtual archive.

<sup>28</sup> The list of authors quoted in different works by Kruger includes, among others, Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain, Robert Frost, Victor Hugo, Abraham Lincoln, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Malcolm X and Indira Gandhi. For a full list, see: Allie Craver, "Picture This: Barbara Kruger's Imperfect Utopia," 2013, 27.

<sup>29</sup> "Architecture was my first engagement. I just loved it but I was bad at math and had no college degree so I couldn't do it. But when I had the opportunity to spatialize my work, it was a thrill to me." (Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, "Spaces, Phrases, Pictures, and Places. A Conversation with Barbara Kruger," in *Barbara Kruger. Believe + Doubt* (Bregenz: Kunsthau Bregenz, 2014); "And I ... don't build models, I don't have acolytes and assistance, ... not that it's wrong but it is not my methodology, it's not my way of working." (Iwona Blazwick and Barbara Kruger, "Barbara Kruger: In Conversation with Iwona Blazwick, from Modern Art Oxford," *This Is Tomorrow*, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, "Spaces, Phrases, Pictures, and Places. A Conversation with Barbara Kruger." In *Barbara Kruger. Believe + Doubt* (Bregenz: Kunsthau Bregenz, 2014), 125.

<sup>31</sup> Iwona Blazwick and Barbara Kruger, "Barbara Kruger: In Conversation with Iwona Blazwick, from Modern Art Oxford," *This Is Tomorrow*, 2014, YouTube, accessed 25 August 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pO\\_4frg7efQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pO_4frg7efQ).

<sup>32</sup> Exhibition: *Barbara Kruger*, New York: Mary Boone Gallery, 1991. For a detailed description of the exhibition, see: Roberta Smith, "Barbara Kruger's Large-Scale Self-Expression," *The New York Times*, 11 January 1991, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/11/arts/review-art-barbara-kruger-s-large-scale-self-expression.html?mcubz=1>.

<sup>33</sup> The artwork is titled *Untitled (Ohne Titel) 1994/1995*. It is important to mention that the issue of titles in Kruger's artistic practice is rather unusual as most of the artworks, not only wall-wraps but also those that the artist referred to as "plain pieces" during the interview, are called *Untitled* with a subtitle in brackets, as in the case of the Stedelijk's *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*.

<sup>34</sup> The description on the Lever House Art Collection's website states: "Works in the exhibition: Barbara Kruger, BETWEEN BEING BORN AND DYING, 2009. Acrylic ink on adhesive vinyl, dimensions variable". See: *Barbara Kruger, Between being born and dying*, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://leverhouseartcollection.com/collectionsexhibitions/collection/between-being-born-and-dying/194>.

<sup>35</sup> Two installations: *Untitled (Suggestions)*, 2013 and *Untitled (Reminder)*, 2013 were shown in Kunsthau Bregenz during the exhibition *Belief + Doubt*. In 2016, for the exhibition *Mashup: The Birth of Modern Culture* at Vancouver Art Gallery, Kruger designed the piece *Untitled (SmashUp)*.

<sup>36</sup> Exhibition: *Barbara Kruger: Belief+Doubt*. 20 August 2012 – present (ongoing). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC. See: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. “Barbara Kruger: Belief+Doubt,” 2012, accessed 26 August 2017, <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/barbara-kruger/#detail=https%3A/hirshhorn.si.edu/bio/barbara-kruger-beliefdoubt/>.

<sup>37</sup> Exhibition: *Empatía*, México City, 2016. See: Aaron Barrera, “Barbara Kruger deja su Empatía en el Metro,” *El Universal*, 2016, November 23. Retrieved from: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/cultura/artes-visuales/2016/11/23/barbara-kruger-deja-su-empatia-en-el-metro#imagen-1>.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Kruger and Alexis Dahan, “On New Forms of Activism,” *Purple Magazine*, 2014, accessed 25 August 2017. <http://purple.fr/magazine/fw-2014-issue-22/barbara-kruger/>.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Hwie-Bing Kwee. (2017, February 17).

<sup>40</sup> Kruger describes in detail her struggles with the shift from analogue to digital in the interview conducted by Blazwick. See: Iwona Blazwick and Barbara Kruger, “Barbara Kruger: In Conversation with Iwona Blazwick, from Modern Art Oxford,” *This Is Tomorrow*, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> *Untitled (Ohne Titel)* 1994/1995 from the Ludwig Museum, Cologne. See: *Untitled (Ohne Titel)*, accessed 16 August 2017, <https://www.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de/documents/obj/05023084>.

<sup>42</sup> Which at first did not include semi-circular plains at the junction of the wall and ceiling of the gallery.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Hwie-Bing Kwee. It is important to note that Kruger herself, in correspondence with the author, firmly denied that she ever called herself a “graffiti artist”. Indeed this comparison does not appear in any other interview conducted with the artist.

<sup>44</sup> A detailed description of the artwork’s technique, material specifications and possible preservation measures has been provided in the report prepared by the author of this text for the SMA. See: Agnieszka Wielocha, “Report on the state of documentation and recommendations regarding preservation strategy for B. Kruger’s *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*,” 360° SMA’s virtual archive (August 2017).

<sup>45</sup> I take “components” to mean the set of all text used in the three consecutive manifestations, the size of the room, and the relationships between texts and colours.

<sup>46</sup> This assumption was confirmed in a part of the investigation which has not been described in this paper. Two additional Kruger wall-wraps collected by museums were studied: *Untitled (Shafted)*, 2008, from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and *Untitled (Ohne Titel)*, 1994/1995, from the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. In the case of the latter, the artwork has already undergone five different manifestations, displayed not only at the home institution but also on loan to other museums.

<sup>47</sup> Nelson Goodman’s concept of ‘allographicity’, developed in the context of the performing arts, has been employed to devise conservation frameworks that account for differences between manifestations of artworks which have no singular or fixed physical presence. See: Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (1968) (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2009). It was introduced in the field of conservation of time-based media art by Pip Laurenson. See: Pip Laurenson, “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations.” *Tate Papers* no. 6 (2006), accessed 16 August 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tatepapers/06/authenticitychangeandlossconservationoftimebasedmediainstallations>. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that since then this binary division has been critically discussed among academics (see: Renée van de Vall, “The Devil and the Details: The Ontology of Contemporary Art in Conservation Theory and Practice,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 55.3 (2015): 285–302. doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayv036; Tiziana Caianiello, “Materializing the Ephemeral: The Preservation and Presentation of Media Art Installations,” in *Media Art Installations: Preservation and Presentation: Materializing the Ephemeral* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2012), 207-229. However, for this line of thinking Goodman’s distinction has become the usual point of departure.

<sup>48</sup> Variable Media Network’s “methodology is seeking to define acceptable levels of change within any given art object and document ways in which a sculpture, installation, or conceptual work may be altered (or not) for the sake of preservation, without losing that work’s essential meaning. The Variable Media approach integrates the analysis of materials with the definition of an artwork independently from its medium, allowing the work to be translated once its current medium becomes obsolete” (“The Variable Media Initiative,” n.d.). See also: Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach* (New York and Montreal: Guggenheim Museum Publications and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> See: “Principles and Best Practices for Oral History | Oral History Association,” 2012, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Barbara Kruger (12 July 2017).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> See: “Conservation – time-based media | Tate.” (n.d.), accessed 28 August 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/conservation/time-based-media>.

<sup>53</sup> See: Caitlin Dover, "Analog To Digital: A Q&A with Guggenheim Conservator Joanna Phillips, Part Two," *Guggenheim Blogs*, 2014, accessed 28 August 2017, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/analog-to-digital-a-q-and-a-with-guggenheim-conservator-joanna-phillips-part-two>; Joanna Phillips, "Reporting Iterations: A Documentation Model for Time-Based Media Art," *Revista de História Da Arte* 4 (2015): 168–79. <http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAW4.pdf>.

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### Interviews conducted by the author:

- Interview with Barbara Kruger. (12 July 2017). Café Dante, New York. Audio recorded and transcribed, transcript archived in 360°, SMA's digital repository.
- Interview with Bart Rutten. (26 September 2016). Participants: Bart Rutten, Head of Collections at the SMA. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Audio recorded and transcribed.
- Interview with Hwie-Bing Kwee. (17 February 2017). Participants: Hwie-Bing Kwee, responsible for business development at Omnimark B.V., the printing lab that produced two versions of *Untitled (Past, Present, Future)*, 2010 for the SMA. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Audio recorded and transcribed, transcript archived in 360°, SMA's digital repository.

## **Acknowledgements**

This article presents part of a PhD research project carried out at the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture, within the framework of New Approaches to Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA), Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network, funded by the European Commission (Marie Curie Program UE, Horizon 2020). The dissertation is supervised by Prof Selma Leydesdorff, Prof Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, Prof Ella Hendriks and Dr Sanneke Stigter, who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research. The author would like to thank the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam team and Hwie-Bing Kwee from Omnimark for their help, support and participation, and Barbara Kruger for her time and involvement.