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Documentation as a tool for Preventive Conservation: results of a project

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The purpose of the paper is to emphasize the process of developing and implementing a documentation project, at a Preventive Conservation level, aiming at creating specific protocols and ensuring more systematic approaches to deal with challenges posed by some contemporary art collections.

Preventive Conservation encompasses research related to the impact of the environment on the materials degradation process - considering light, relative humidity, temperature, pollution, biological attack - as well as key issues, such as collections management policies involving documentation, handling, packaging, transportation and safety in general. It is a relatively new area of research, which began in the 1980s.

Deep conceptual changes in artistic production formats, in the registration of cultural productions and in the procedures for material production impel the area of preservation to think its performance through a broadly scoped reflection, which can no longer be restricted only to its specific field of knowledge.

For a long time, archival science, library science, museology, archeology, ethnology, and conservation-restoration created non-communicable management practices, resulting in distinct approaches, parameters and collection management protocols. The inflexibility of the fields determined an overlap of efforts and often the establishment of inadequate documentation management.

However, it is noteworthy that physical organization and documentation management are narrow procedures that must happen simultaneously in collection management projects; those are interdependent because the physical organization allows material safeguard of the collection, and

document management enables risk management--especially from dissociation--and the tracking of the collections history and context.

Conservation Science defined as a transdisciplinary field of knowledge is a scientific approach that seeks the unity of knowledge around polysemic questions directed to the preservation of cultural heritage. Considering this transdisciplinary status, conservation science seeks to encourage a new understanding of its research subject – cultural heritage preservation - articulating elements that may pass between, over and through related subjects, aiming at understanding the complexity associated with heritage preservation.

The failure of assumptions supporting the incommunicability of the scientific areas that deal with cultural heritage, particularly in contemporary art, can be observed when projects and investments in storage areas and exhibitions in museums emphasize mostly the issues related to environmental management, at the expense (or total ignorance) of the collections documentation context. The documentary organization or the physical organization of the collection are not constantly considered and, mistakenly, environmental control systems are prioritized on these diagnosis. Inventory, then, is not perceived as a procedure of Preventive Conservation and thus is not always contemplated at Preventive Conservation projects. When the physical organization is contemplated, it is not always associated with systematized documentation management.

In projects of conception or adequacy of collections management spaces for research, custody or exhibition, the creation of a secure documentation base is preponderant. Dissociation of information invalidates the object's merit and its interlocution potential. So the identification and inventory of the collection, which systematizes and enables access to information, should always be the precedence of any Preventive Conservation project. For the conservation of some contemporary art works of conceptual nature the documentation process can be even more central. When the object and the material facet of the work don't exist anymore or don't aggregate the overall meaning of the concept/proposal envisioned by the artist documentation could be the only adequate strategy for permanence and conservation. Performance art, time-based media, installations and other works of ephemeral nature are good examples of the fundamental role of documentation and the actual challenges in contemporary art conservation.

Among the protocols established for the conservation of collections, the inventory is one of the primary tools, initial and indispensable for the recognition of the collection, its quantification and qualification. The inventory fulfills the role of registering the object and considering tools such as Risk Diagnosis and Diagnosis in Preventive Conservation, it means one of the first access control protocols, and is the first recognition strategy for evaluating collections.

In this context, when a specific collection storage or exhibition reorganization project is approved, the implementation stage is the moment of greatest vulnerability for the collection, as it implies withdrawal operations, transfer and reorganization of the collection to another space. Theft and loss are common at this moment and, without a proper documentation control, once the objects are lost, lost they will remain. Beyond that, collections vulnerability is installed in a double operational conundrum: the potential dissociation of information by the lack of object registration and the physical deterioration of the object due to its movement. Thus, informational vulnerability involves

two conceptual and technical problems: the loss of specific research information and the lack of collections documentation management. The Information System is the tool that deals with this issues and hence should be a priority protocol in Preventive Conservation actions.

A systemic approach to this problem is the gateway to help find operational methodologies which are efficient to address challenges presented by the preservation of contemporary art. An integrated perspective encompassing management processes, documentation, and conservation offers opportunities to guarantee that the original production are kept, enabling the development of more dynamic and functional working tools.

Thinking the Inventory as an introductory or basilar protocol of the practice of preventive conservation does not mean the discredit or minimization of the impact of all other environmental factors, as a collection inventoried subjected to biological attack is so alarming as a collection not inventoried whose records were lost. Nor it exceeds the limits of competence of the area, because the principle of preservation is gestated by transdisciplinarity.

The question is not to posit what problem is more significant or a priority, but to realize that the specificity of contemporary art collections imposes a different view to the preventive conservation area, which should establish a close dialogue with the institution to better understand the real needs of preservation. In turn, the increased capacity of Preventive Conservation provides an offset between, over and across multiple disciplines in the search for solutions to problems related to the management and preservation of collections, acting beyond fixed paradigms gestated in fixed areas.

Contemporary art collections require an accurate intercommunication between the collection and the surrounding documentation: letters, designs, sketches, photographs, catalogs, texts, journals, assembly instructions are significant records to the study of the artist and his/her work. Even the common and usually simpler operation of identifying what is the work and understanding its physical and conceptual boundaries could represent a great challenge when dealing with contemporary art collections. To overcome this it is mandatory to have access to the contextual relations placed by the creation, use and display of the art work.

In the implementation of Preventive Conservation projects, the Conservation Diagnosis should provide the necessary data on the informational management policy of these collections, including transfer and location documentation issues.

An intelligent and strategic project is one that has the necessary requirements to preserve the collection: documentation, packaging, environmental compliance, building maintenance plan, survey plan, biological attack control, handling protocols. It is also one that involves the viability of the shares of transformations engendered practices in customary habits of institutional agents.

So if these assumptions are not yet considered in Preventive Conservation projects, how can funds be granted for the documentation projects in the conservation field? How can projects be managed? How can one deal with the bureaucracy? These are the questions we have tried to answer with this project at the Federal University of Minas Gerais.

IMPLEMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENTS

After funding by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), through an information science fund (CNPq/MinC/SEC Nº 80/2013, the methodology was implemented in three basic steps:

Workshop: Documentation as a Preservation Tool:

A workshop for the project's team, held from 12 to 14 March 2014, promoted a discussion and reflection about methodologies and standards. Two international experts, Stephen Stead and Fernando Cabral – both CIDOC's member and connected directly to the creation and use of protocols and implementation of information systems, were invited to facilitate the workshop. The main objective was frontloading the project with expertise, since this is fairly a new ground in Brazil. It is important to notice that frequently expertise consultants are usually invited to a project after it has been implemented, and much has already been done, resulting in the ineffective expenditure of great effort and time, without the generation of appropriate knowledge. The early engagement of international experts fostered success in implementing the project.

The Workshop: Documentation as a Preservation Tool aimed at discussing the relationship of (a) the documentation as collections preservation tool, (b) the inclusion of new technologies and (c) the construction of scientific parameters in the integrated management actions. The event was made possible by the budgetary appropriation provided in the project, which covered the cost of international travel, pro-labor, preparation of lesson material, translation and stay of the invited consultants.

Learning activities targeting the project's team were opened for a few professionals of other institutions in Belo Horizonte, in order to give access and provide an expanded and updated view of the processes, tools, systems and international standards to improve functioning of cultural heritage documentation tasks and to provide the necessary basis for computerization and access. Special attention was given to CRM (Conceptual Reference Model). Altogether 30 people participated in the training. The workshop reached its objectives of promoting the discussion and reflection around main paradigms for modeling protocol proposals that will be implemented in the collections.

The implementation of the methodology proposed by the experts:

In order to implement standardization in the studied collection, the project aimed to determine the general structure of the database - the constituent fields of each record and the standards that control the registration of fields through syntax - content and terminology - values.

We sought for the standards to be used for the project in various national and international publications in order to adapt to the needs of the collection studied. As we also sought the names of expertise consultants, connected directly to the creation and use of protocols and implementation of information systems, for the necessary knowledge to the implementation of the information system for an artist's collections management.

The preparation of a subsidized pilot project to assess the quality of the standards discussed and applied:

The main contributions of this research are related to the development of collection policies guided on management protocols subsidized by the research; improvement and use of information systems international standards, considering the NICTs (New Information and Communication Technologies).

The definition of a data model subsidized by international standards is only at a preliminary stage in Brazil. In the Information Science area, there are conceptual and operational demands in this field of activity and even in government bodies such as IBRAM (Brazilian Institute of Museums) - responsible for museum policies in the country - there is no reference standard or protocol allowing the institutions or the collections management software companies, to develop a working basis for the construction of an information system for collections management.

Considering the fundamental objective of the project of presenting a proposed standard for the construction and / or use of database management systems for artists collections and to seek the best solution in terms of software to manage information, we can list some developments that occurred from closer relations with the CIDOC-ICOM, in addition to the project scope, and starting from the Workshop: Documentation as a Preservation Tool, which was planned as a methodological strategy, namely: the translation of The Checklist For Museum Collections Management Policy (Maija Ekosaari, Sari Jantunen, Leena Paaskoski) and its publication in the journal PÓS: Journal of the Arts Post Graduate Program n.8 - UFMG (www.eba.ufmg.br/revistapos) and the realization of the First International Seminar - Preservation as a Documentation Tool. These developments, beyond the initial proposal, meant the consolidation, by the ARCHE Research Group, of research lines related to the field of Preventive Conservation and Collections Management.

The generation of manuals, which establish models or paradigms, contributes to the improvement of the activities in institutions, as well as the establishment of common and shared practices. Thus, the focus of the organized manuals is the proposition of "preventive conservation management protocols of Contemporary Art collections" from the concept of "Documentation as a preventive conservation tool."

The merit of the proposed research - Information Systems: preventive conservation management protocols of contemporary art collections - could be observed in the process of bringing together people from international and national projection to present, discuss and rethink the management tools in the up-to-date context of Information Science.

The elaboration of six procedure manuals was thought for this project. Associated, these tools enable the improvement of the institutional team, instrumentalizing it to, autonomously, develop the actions necessary for the good practice of preservation in collections management. Similarly, it allows the institutions to evaluate the projects and actions implemented by outside consultants.

Therefore, in conclusion, collections policies require the generation of preventive conservation management protocols that coordinate the expertise from different areas – library science, archival science, museology, conservation-restoration, information science and computer science – for the establishment of guidelines and integrated actions of organization in projects' initial stages.