

TECHNICAL ART HISTORY COLLOQUIUM

Oral History in Conservation and (Technical) Art History



Date: Thursday 4 October 2018

Time: 14.00 - 15.45

Location: Room B, 1st floor Ateliergebouw, Hobbemastraat 22, Amsterdam

Admission free

Chair: Ella Hendriks, Professor of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, UvA

14.00-14.05: Welcome and introduction by chair

14.05-14.25: Esther van Duijn

14.25-14.45: Aafke Weller

14.45-14.55: Discussion

14.55-15.15: Sanneke Stigter

15.15-15.35: Aga Wielocha

15.35-15.45: Discussion

Image and source (l): Interview Joep van Lieshout / Atelier Van Lieshout – Head (series), 2006. Photo: Sanneke Stigter.

The Technical Art History Colloquia are organised by Sven Dupré (Utrecht University and University of Amsterdam, PI ERC ARTECHNE), Arjan de Koomen (University of Amsterdam, Coordinator MA Technical Art History), Abbie Vandivere (University of Amsterdam, Coordinator MA Technical Art History & Paintings Conservator, Mauritshuis, The Hague), Erma Hermens (University of Amsterdam and Rijksmuseum) and Ann-Sophie Lehmann (University of Groningen). The Technical Art History Colloquia are a cooperation of the ARTECHNE Project (Utrecht University and University of Amsterdam), the Netherlands Institute for Conservation, Art and Science (NICAS), the University of Amsterdam and the Mauritshuis. The ARTECHNE project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 648718).

Introduction

This edition in the series of Technical Art History colloquiums is a follow-up to the colloquium on conservation history held at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem on 8 February 2018. It focuses on the method of oral history used for documentation and research purposes in the fields of conservation and (technical) art history. Four speakers will draw on their own studies of traditional to contemporary art works in a museum setting to illustrate how oral history has enriched their research and findings. Oral history may be considered complementary to study of the physical object and related written and pictorial sources that document its past. This combined approach can help to reconstruct the physical evolution of an art work through time, including former interventions by conservators and the likely reasons behind them. In a broader sense too, oral history adds to our knowledge of conservation history. For instance, it can offer an 'insider's view' on matters relating to the development of the conservation profession in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Speakers will present examples that shed light on how knowledge and ideas have been transmitted within and between related professional groups (such as conservators, curators and conservation scientists), and how interdepartmental dynamics and hierarchies existing within the settings of large institutional museums have shaped conservation decision-making. Together these insights gained through oral history improve our knowledge and understanding of the past, and provide a basis for reflection and making informed choices with regard to the future conservation, installation and display of art works.

At a methodological level, speakers will reflect upon the notions of interview as compared to oral history method, and how the interview is a co-constructed product of the interviewer and interviewee and must be critically interpreted as such. References will be made to pioneering initiatives such as the Oral History Project started by the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) under the leadership of Joyce Hill Stoner in 1975, and the Artist Interview research projects developed by RCE (then ICN) and SBMK. As oral history is increasingly used by the Dutch community of conservators and (technical) art historians for specific projects, we plea for a more integrated platform that draws together and connects these various initiatives within a sustainable framework.

Programme

14.00-14.05: Welcome and introduction by chair

Ella Hendriks, Professor of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, University of Amsterdam

14.05-14.25: Esther van Duijn, 'Throwing restorers down the stairs and others tall tales - Some thoughts on the values and limitations of conservator interviews as a source for the study of conservation history'

For her research project studying the conservation history of the Rijksmuseum's paintings collection (2015-2018), the author has used five conservator interviews. Two interviews - with the American conservators William Suhr and Louis Pomerantz - had been carried out in the 1970s by Joyce Hill Stoner for the FAIC Oral History Project. Three other interviews with two Rijksmuseum restorers and one curator had been carried out by former Rijksmuseum conservator H  l  ne Kat in the 1990s for the museum itself. The presentation will discuss the values of these five interviews as a source of information for the author's research project, but also some of the limitations, focussing not only on the question of reliability, but also on the (un)desirability to share some of the more sensational tales.

Dr. Esther van Duijn is paintings conservator and researcher. Between 2015 and 2018 she carried out a research project with the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam to study the conservation history of the museum's paintings collection.

14.25-14.45: Aafke Weller, 'The stuff you won't read in conservation journals. Conservators and conservation technicians on the use of Chloramine-T in the paper conservation studio of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam between 1950 and 1985'

Chloramine-T was a very popular bleaching agent among paper conservators until - in the late sixties - more and more conservators and conservation scientists started to raise objections. Scientists found that, contrary to prior believe, Chloramine-T residues in paper retain their oxidizing power which potentially

leads to an increase in acidity, a loss of strength and progressive brightening of the paper. Recently, roughly half a century after Chloramine-T fell into disuse, the Rijksmuseum asked for an assessment of the actual damage to its collection. However, a systematic examination of objects treated with Chloramine-T turned out to be problematic as the museum could not easily retrieve those objects based on the available information. Interviews with former conservators and conservation technicians appeared the best avenue towards the identification of objects that most likely had been treated with Chloramine-T. But aside from pointing towards areas of risk in the collection, the interviewees also gave a valuable insight into a studio practice with its very own dynamics.

Aafke Weller works as a freelance paper conservator and researcher. She graduated with a Professional Doctorate in paper conservation from the University of Amsterdam in 2017 with a thesis on the history of the use of Chloramine-T in the paper conservation studio of the Rijksmuseum. Aafke currently works as a researcher for Eye Filmmuseum, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and for Hoogduin Papierrestauratoren (on the collection of Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam).

14.45-14.55: Discussion

14.55-15.15: Sanneke Stigter, 'An interview-informed growing sculpture? Reflections on interviewing in conservation research'

Interviewing has become an important research tool in the conservation of contemporary art. However, the interview as an art technological source needs critical assessment, as it is not only first-hand information, but also constructed. Oral history theory makes clear that the role of the interviewer is crucial to the outcome, as it is a negotiated text. In the conservator's aim to keep a low profile in an artwork's life, special guidelines have been developed to conduct interviews geared at conservation. In addition, a reflexive stance based on ethnographic research methods is proposed to allow for a critical approach in using this form of oral history for decision-making in conservation. This presentation offers insight into the theoretical basis and understanding of the artist interview in conservation research with reference to the practices around a process-based artwork of Sjoerd Buisman.

Dr. Sanneke Stigter is Assistant Professor and Leader of the Contemporary Art Conservation track at the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage Programme, University of Amsterdam. She has been researching artist interviews in conservation since 2001, including as part of RCE (then ICN) and SBMK research projects.

15.15-15.35: Aga Wielocha, 'The artist interview and beyond: Oral histories in the conservation of contemporary art'

Departing from the notion of contemporary art understood as a new paradigm in artistic practice, this paper explains why methods and strategies that originates from and build on the experiences of the discipline of Oral History are suitable for building a basis for conservation-related decision-making regarding contemporary artworks.

Aga Wielocha is a doctoral candidate at the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture within the research program 'New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art' (NACCA), a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network funded by the European Union.

15.35-15.45: Discussion

Save the date!

Technical Art History Colloquium: 'Leonardo against Humanity', 12 December, Haarlem