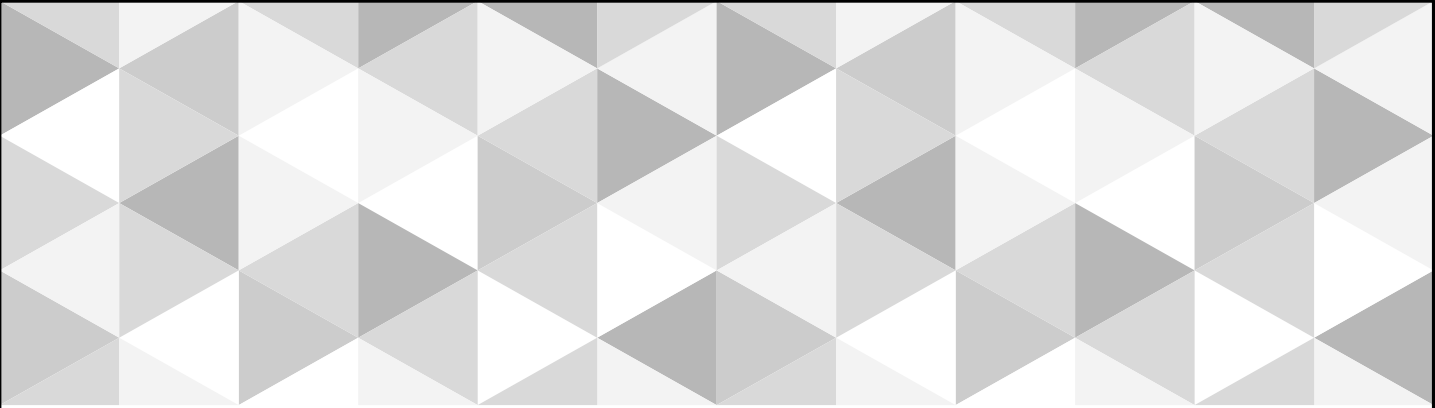# Beyond the Artist Interview:
Notes from the Field

nacca
NEW APPROACHES IN THE CONSERVATION
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

'Beyond the Artist Interview: Notes from the Field' is a collaborative effort of NACCA's doctoral researchers, with the title of our talk inspired by Kate Lewis's 2015 presentation at the AIC Annual Meeting.

The NACCA programme is coordinated by Maastricht University and funded by the European Union. It consists of 15 PHD researchers hosted by 9 different universities and museums and 21 supervisors who are leading specialists in the field. While each NACCA PhD project investigates a different aspect of contemporary art conservation, there is a common thread running through all these projects: the question how identity, authenticity and values of contemporary artworks are affected by the practices governing their conservation, by the historically grown distinctions between museum professionals and by the organization of institutional eco-systems?
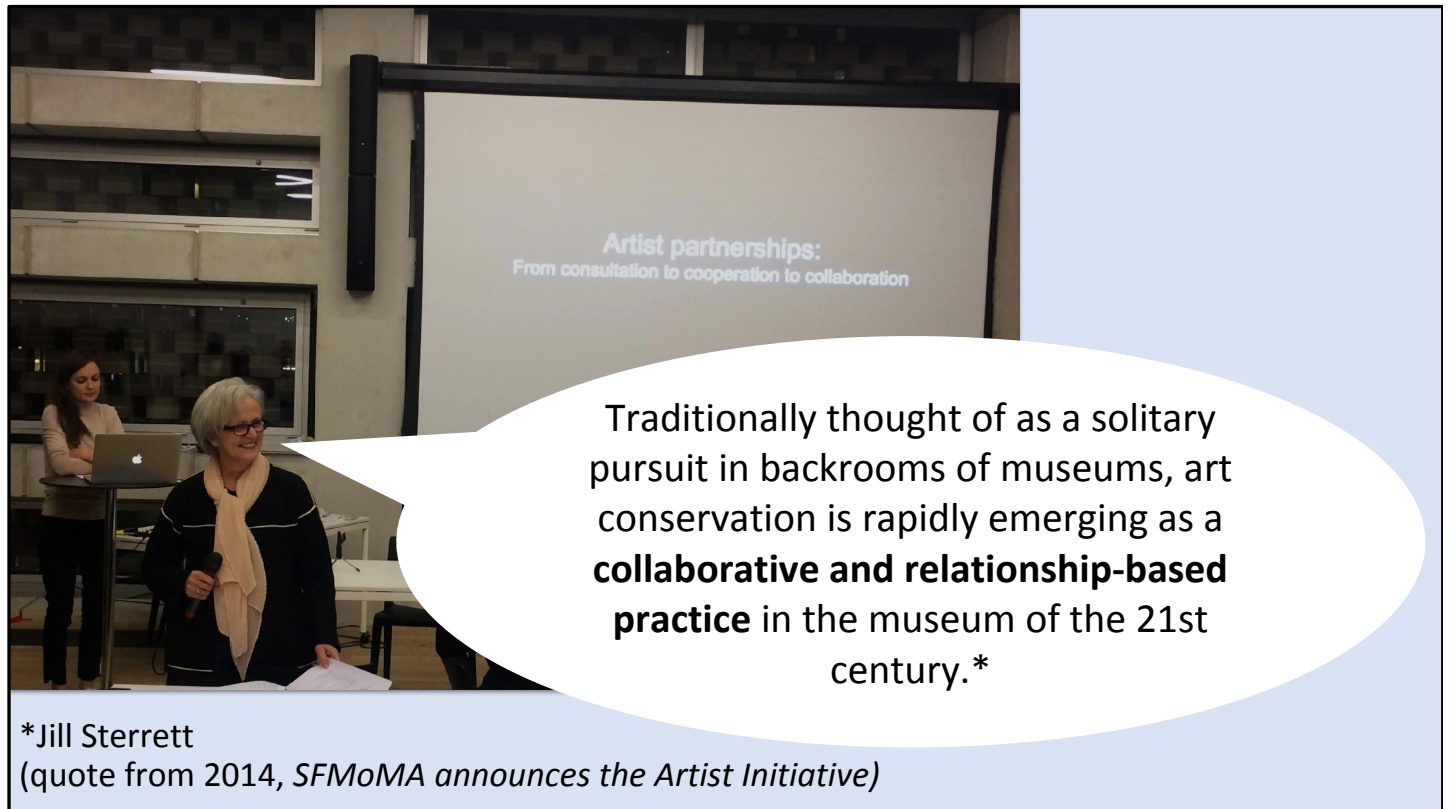
… more than 30 museums and other collecting institutions

Tate	UK	Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam	Netherlands
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh	UK	Tadeusz Kantor Foundation, Warsaw/Cracow	Poland
Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), Glagow	UK	Museum of Art, Lodz	Poland
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome	Italy	Gulbenkian Museum	Portugal
Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome	Italy	Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)	USA, CA
Centre Pompidou	France	SFMOMA	USA, CA
Museum Moderner Kunst, Frankfurt	Germany	Fowler Museum at UCLA	USA, CA
Zero Foundation, Düsseldorf	Germany	Yale Collections Study Center	USA, CT
ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe	Germany	Whitney Museum of American Art	USA, NY
Digitales Kunst- und Kulturarchiv, Düsseldorf	Germany	MoMA	USA, NY
MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt	Germany	Whitney	USA, NY
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Germany	Guggenheim	USA, NY
Kröller-Müller Museum	Netherlands	Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona	Spain
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam	Netherlands	Haus der elektronischen Kuenste, Basel	Switzerland
RCE Cultural Heritage Agency	Netherlands	Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen	Denmark
Bonnefantenmuseum	Netherlands		
LIMA	Netherlands	…	

As the programme has been designed as practice-based, we all conducted fieldwork in museums and other collecting institutions or with other external partners both in Europe and the United States. We prepared an overview for you here of some locations where fieldwork was conducted.

Then, for this presentation, we conducted a preliminary poll to establish the general methods used in our research. Here, a commonality within the different research projects emerged: artist interviews were complemented - and in fact, **significantly outnumbered** - by interviews with other stakeholders including curators, conservators, producers and members of the public.

SLIDE 4

Artist partnerships:
From consultation to cooperation to collaboration

Traditionally thought of as a solitary pursuit in backrooms of museums, art conservation is rapidly emerging as a **collaborative and relationship-based practice** in the museum of the 21st century.*

*Jill Sterrett
(quote from 2014, *SFMoMA announces the Artist Initiative)*

With this finding as our point of departure, we based our paper on two concepts: one follows Jill Sterrett's notion that the conservation of contemporary art is a **collaborative, relationship-based practice**. Jill aptly pointed out that the perpetuation of contemporary art often relies on **an entire corps of experts**. We in the conservation field must modify our tools accordingly and utilise methodologies which capture the multi-vocality that she identified.

We inserted this conference booklet from 1981 to illustrate that different stakeholders were acknowledged from fairly early on in contemporary art conservation. But to show how far the field has come in our understanding of who influences artworks, we have also added many more bubbles, in hopes that we may visualise that corps of experts that Jill refers to.

In the Field...

Researcher Maria Theodoraki interviewing SFMOMA Assistant Registrar Grace Weiss about the artwork *Learning to Love You More* (2002-2009) by Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July, April 2018

Given the importance of capturing that multi-vocality, the NACCA network elected to adopt a primarily ethnographic approach in our research/fieldwork, using interviews, participant observation and other collaborative methods.

SLIDE 7

Not only the artist (as key informant) should be studied, also the museum tools and practices in which knowledge is created, becomes a topic of our inquiry.*

*Vivian van Saaze (2009)

'From Intention to Interaction: Reframing the Artist's Interview in Conservation Research'

(image: screenshot from her presentation 'Doing Artworks' at Tate's *Shifting Practice - Shifting Roles?*)

This methodology was inspired by Vivian van Saaze's pioneering research on 'Doing Artworks'. Thus, the second concept that this presentation builds on is Vivian's call for using ethnography-inspired research methods in conservation to make visible how museum practices shape contemporary artworks.

Why ethnography-inspired fieldwork?

Methodological and theoretical concerns:

- Embraces subjectivity
- Requires reflexivity
- Interviews/interactions seen as knowledge production tools
- Pursuit of data validation
- Tacit/embodied knowledge that can't be verbalised
- Ability to capture many diverse voices

She argued that ethnography lends itself as a research method for conservators because of a set of mutual methodological and theoretical concerns. Because the researcher is the primary research instrument, we must acknowledge that we bring our own values, agendas, and blind-spots to the field. A reflexive awareness of interviews and other interactions as sites of co-produced knowledge leads ethnographers to seek validation of interview content with respect to: the context of that interview's setting, the background of the participants, tacit or embodied knowledge that is left out of such dialogues, and other diverse voices that havent been captured at all.
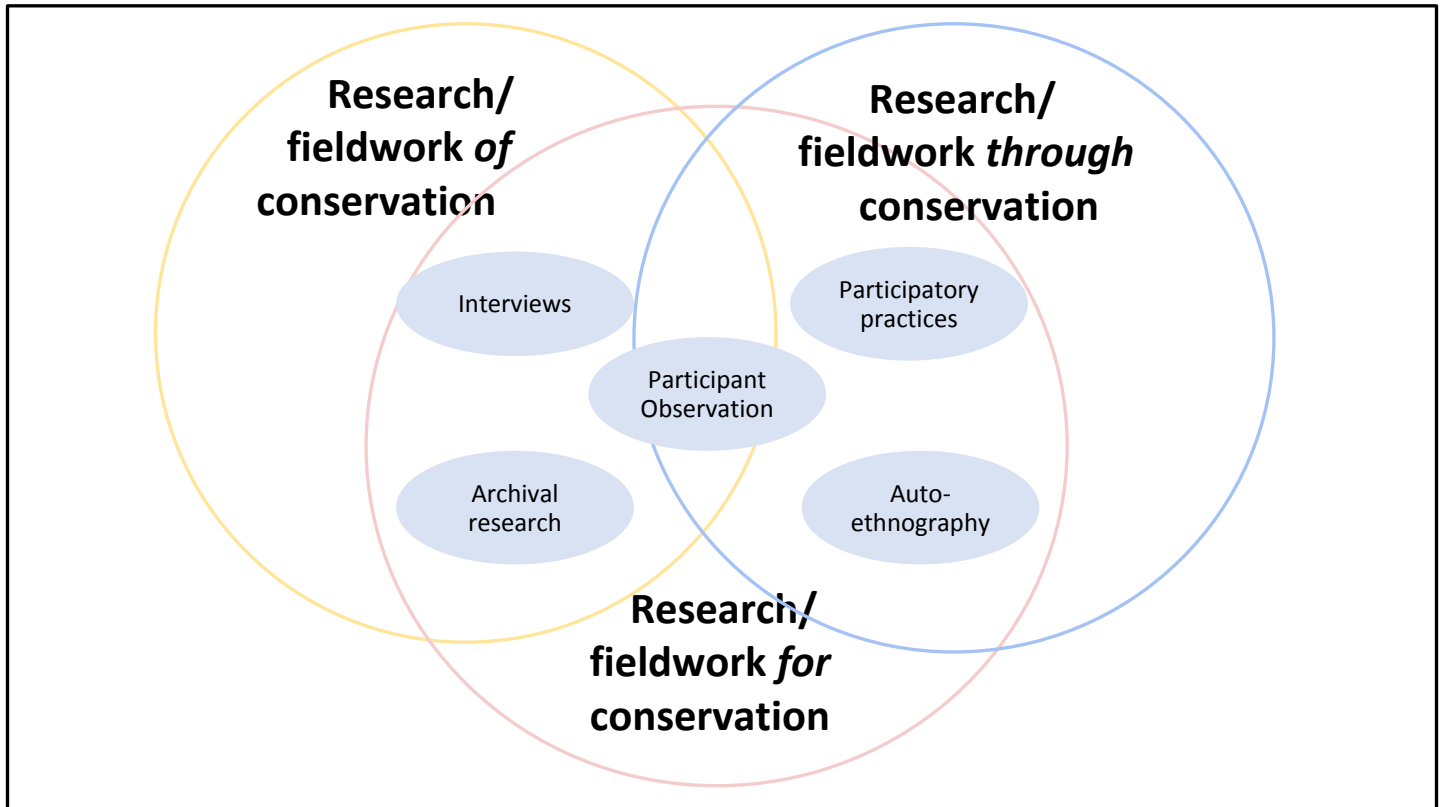
SLIDE 9

Research/ fieldwork	*of* conservation:	*for* conservation:	*through* conservation:
	an ethnographic study of museum/conservation professional practices to generate theoretical analyses that serve future and/or other conservators, and only by extension, the artworks in their care	using ethnography-inspired research methods for completing imminent conservation duties such as ensuring proper display of, creating adequate documentation for, or treating works of art and cultural expression	collecting information through conservation activities and practices

Here, we propose a typology of the various ways that ethnography-inspired research methods can be used in the conservation field.

The first is through an investigation **OF** conservation as a discipline, examining professional practice to drive transformation of the field in terms of ethics, standards, and protocol. While that may benefit artworks in a general sense, it is not the same as undertaking fieldwork specifically **FOR** conservation. This means using ethnography-inspired research methods to complete imminent conservation duties directly related to artworks, to inform strategies of display, documentation, or treatment. Finally, research can be carried out **THROUGH** conservation itself either in a traditional scientific sense or in other innovative ways.

In this slide, we had a go at placing different ethnographic tools in relation to the three categories we just described… These categories are not set in stone and the boundaries are often blurred.

Survey discussion

- Survey created to examine how we used ethnography-inspired tools during research/fieldwork for conservation (to collect conservation-related information about artworks)
- 32 questions addressed the differences between collecting information from artists and collecting information from other stakeholders and collaborators

To examine and share experiences on how we were using interviews and other tools during research/fieldwork **for** conservation we jointly designed and conducted an internal survey. The survey's questions addressed differences between collecting information from artists and collecting information from other stakeholders like those mentioned earlier. The results show how we gathered our data and evaluated the processes, and allowed us to characterise both the advantages and the pitfalls of certain approaches. Our responses also raised important questions about the after-life of the documentary sources we created – their form, value, accessibility, status, and function within an institutional framework.

Survey discussion - Participants

Have you conducted research **for conservation** using ethnographic methods during your fieldwork?

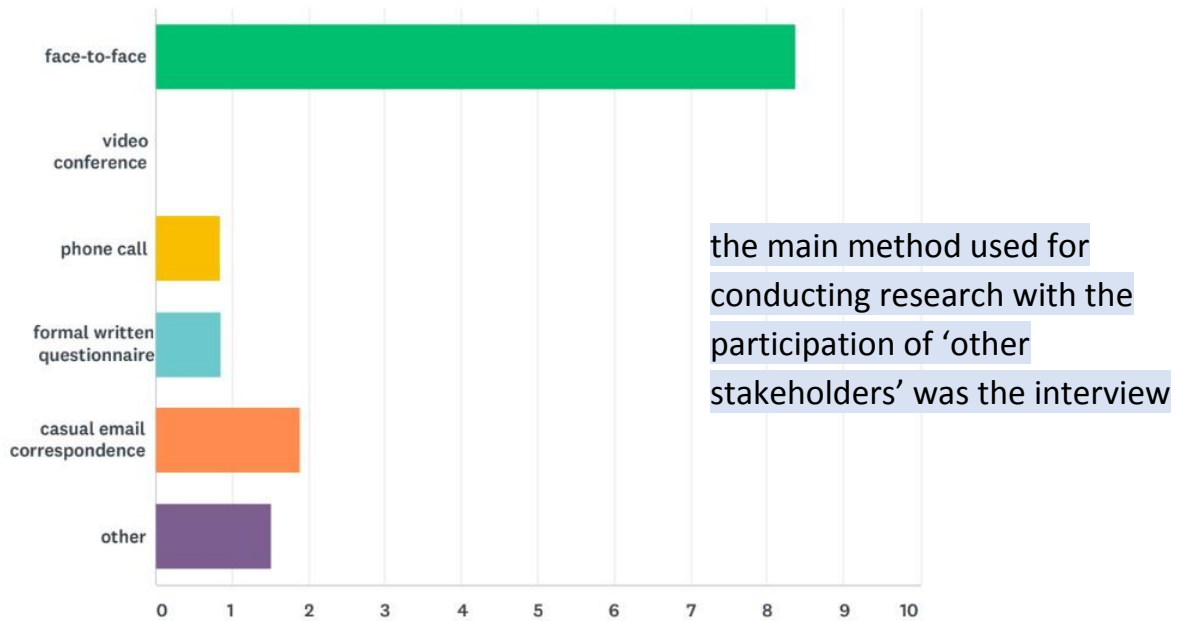|	
12 (out of 15) researchers	conducted research for conservation
11 (out of 12) researchers	conducted interviews with artists
11 (out of 12) researchers	conducted interviews with other stakeholders
7 (out of 12) researchers	used other methods than interviews for the same purpose

40 interviews with artists

95 interviews with other stakeholders

This slide shows general statistics. A preliminary analysis of the findings showed that the majority of our participants fit into the category "other stakeholders" and the major struggles that NACCA researchers encountered during their fieldwork were also related to the interaction with and the management of data obtained from this group. This issue is under-examined both in conservation literature and museum practice, which has justifiably focussed on interviewing artists; our research has identified a blind spot, and therefore the rest of this presentation will focus on the survey findings related to fieldwork engaging with stakeholders other than artists

SLIDE 13

Survey discussion - Methods

How many of the following kinds of interviews did you conduct with other stakeholders?

the main method used for conducting research with the participation of 'other stakeholders' was the interview

In case of other stakeholders the main method used was an interview. Within this method the most popular was the face-to-face encounter.

Survey discussion - Methods

Have you used other methods to collect information from other stakeholders?

"ah, I am getting confused - was speaking to XX an informal dialogue or an interview?... hmmmm"

The information from other stakeholders was also collected through other ethnographic methods: standard ones, like participant observation, but also specific to the field, like common work on installation. The most popular method after the interview was an informal dialogue. However, interestingly, some of the comments to this question indicate that the differences in practical implementation of some of the methods might be blurred.

Survey discussion - Method evaluation

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the methods that you have used?

ADVANTAGES   ←   **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**   →   DISADVANTAGES

"developing rapport, gaining physical and embodied knowledge"

"occupying the liminal status in between artist and institution is both an advantage in terms of research output and being able to mediate when tensions arise"

"much more revealing information than (collected by means of) interview, things I would have not asked, it shows also practices and relations (things in connection and dependencies)"

"feeling obliged to mediate when tensions arise"

"(…) influence (…) of my presence (people feel observed and try to show best practices)"

"it takes up extensive time and effort"

One of the most interesting findings from the survey are related to the use of the ethnographic methods other than interviews. Participant observation has been valued by some as more revealing than the interview as it allows to develop rapport, learn about physical and embodied knowledge, as well as relations between different agents. Common pitfalls indicated the influence of researcher on the processes observed and the fact that this method requires extensive time commitment.

Survey discussion - Method evaluation

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the methods that you have used?

ADVANTAGES ← **COMMON WORK ON INSTALLATION** → DISADVANTAGES

"developing rapport, being able to witness the evolution through biographical moments of a work (gaining a diachronic picture of its identity)"

"participants are sometimes very concentrated on the installation work and they might feel controlled by the researcher"

"have the object to test thoughts and testimonies, helps to find questions, important to establish the understanding of the work"

"the presence of the researcher can slow down the work and might result annoying to the rest of the team"

Common work on installation allows to witness the evolution of an artwork; however, similarly to the participant observation, the presence of the researcher may affect the development of certain processes, both in conceptual and in practical way.

Survey discussion - Method evaluation

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the methods that you have used?

ADVANTAGES ← **INFORMAL DIALOGUES** → DISADVANTAGES

"developing rapport, more comfortable atmosphere leads to a wider range of statements"

"unexpected information can arise"

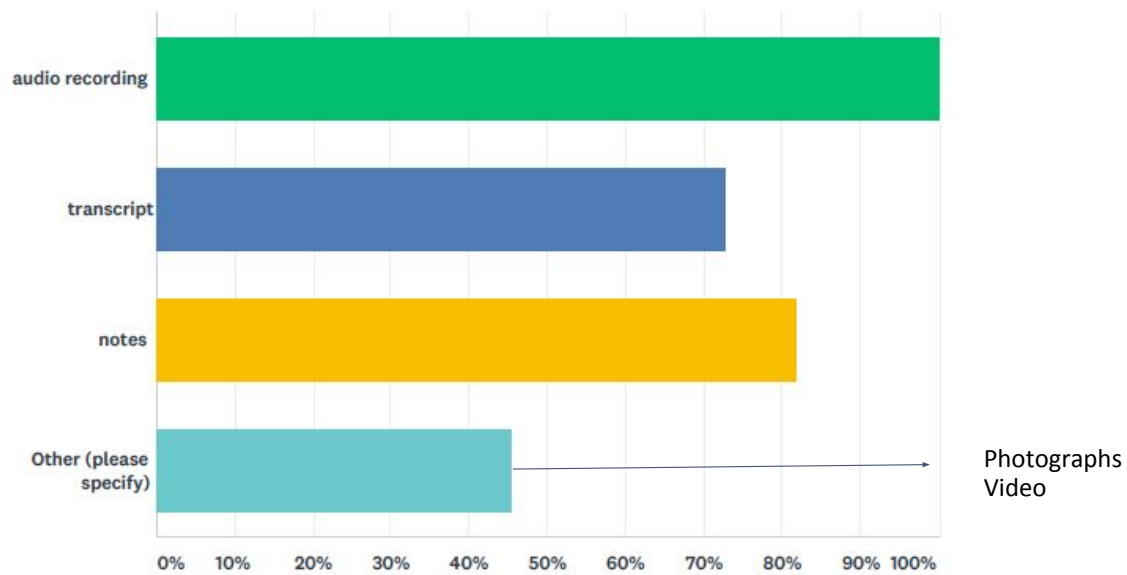"not every statement is captured word-for-word for reference"

"you might miss vital information or else respondents will go back on what they have previously said. Also the enquiry might not be as focused as you might like"

In the case of informal dialogues their main advantage is informality, which again allows for developing rapport and facilitates the appearance of unexpected information. However, in the course of the dialogue one can miss vital information as not every statement is captured word-for-word.

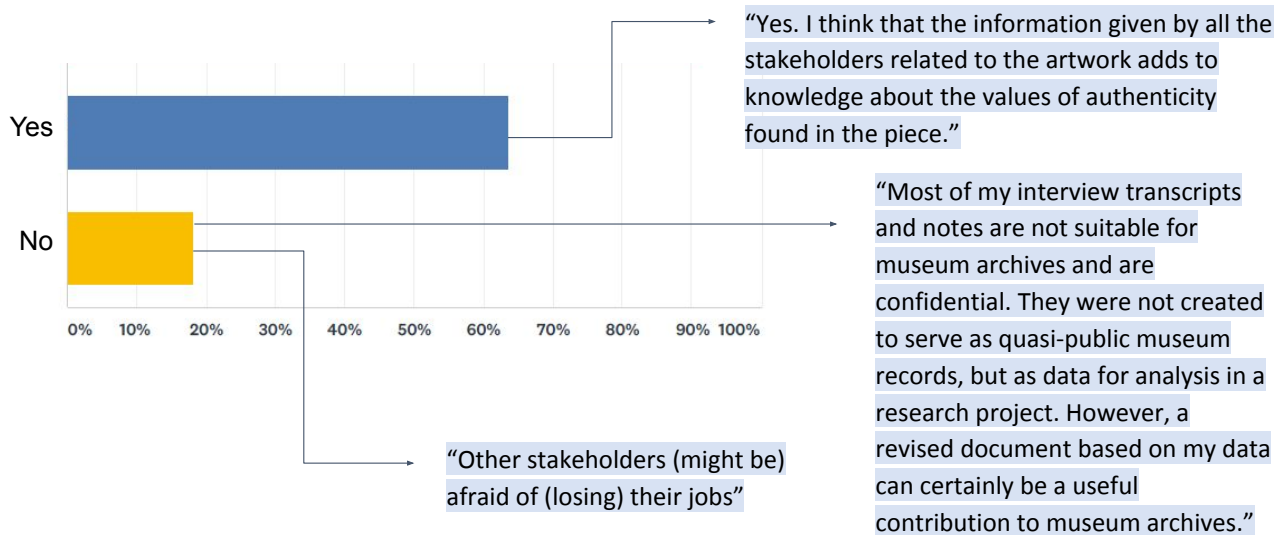**Survey discussion - Data after-life**

What kind of record(s) did you create? Select all that apply:

The data from the fieldwork takes different formats such as audio recordings and their transcripts, notes, photos, and videos

Survey discussion - Data after-life

Do you think that the information that you have collected by means of interview (+ other methods) should be included in museum documentation?

"Yes. I think that the information given by all the stakeholders related to the artwork adds to knowledge about the values of authenticity found in the piece."

"Most of my interview transcripts and notes are not suitable for museum archives and are confidential. They were not created to serve as quasi-public museum records, but as data for analysis in a research project. However, a revised document based on my data can certainly be a useful contribution to museum archives."

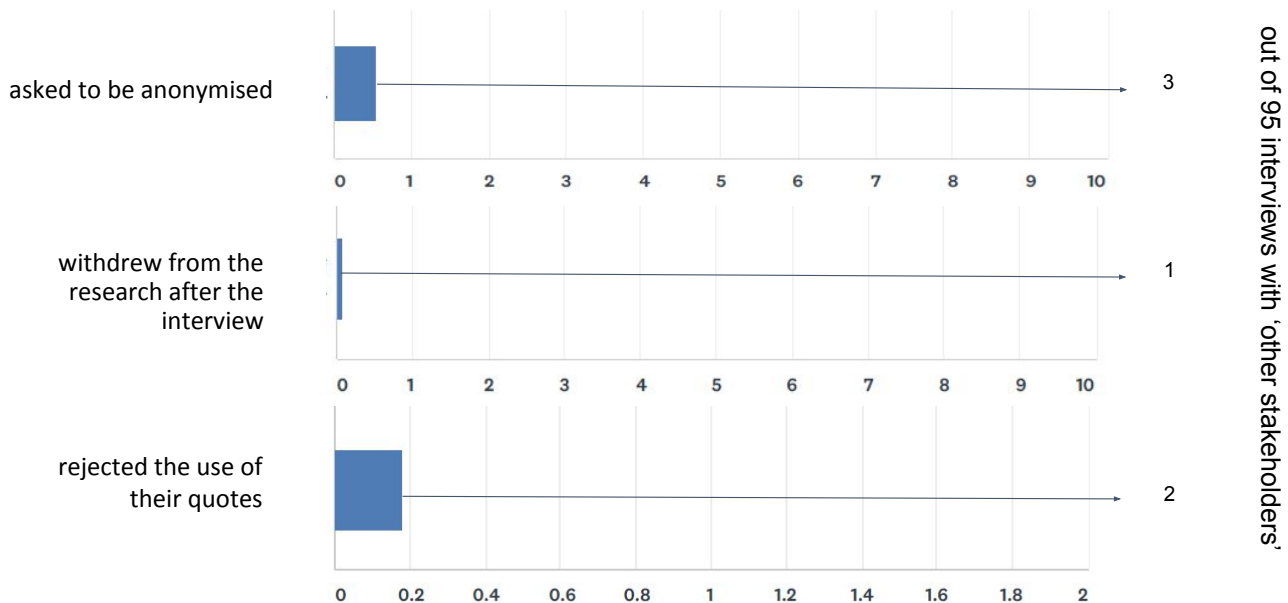"Other stakeholders (might be) afraid of (losing) their jobs"

Finally we've asked ourselves if the information collected from other stakeholders during the fieldwork should enter the documentation of the studied institution. Although most of us were positive about this idea, the rest expressed their doubts by pointing at the purpose of the fieldwork: it was conducted for a particular research not for documentation, and therefore before being included in the museum archive it needs to be edited and reformatted. Other researchers pointed into the problem of the protection of the participants, especially those employed by institutions.

This comment raises the awareness of possible consequences of sharing data even internally.

Survey discussion - Data after-life

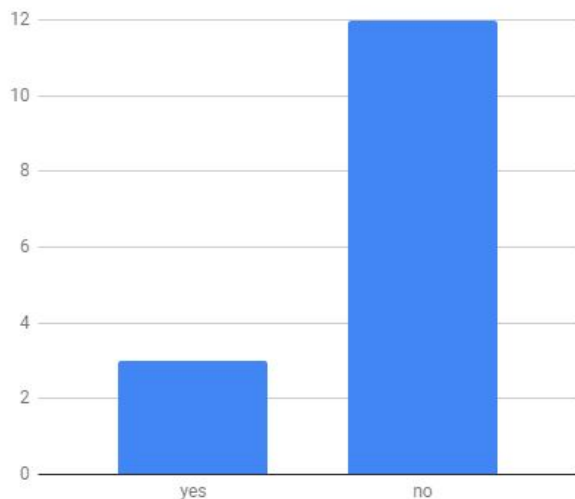How many of your participants ('other stakeholders'):

The issues relating to participant protection, confidentiality, and data management, were also addressed in the survey. To learn whether participants might feel unsafe about the information revealed to NACCA researchers, we asked how many interviewees: requested to be anonymised, withdrew from the research after the interview, or rejected the use of their quotes.

This is a work in progress and the numbers may change in the future, but at the time we carried out the survey out of 95 interviews conducted with 'other stakeholders': 6 participants declined to authorise the use of their data, perhaps indicating that they felt the information they provided might put them in a vulnerable position. This may not seem to be a big number, but it indicates that the problem actually exists.

Analysing survey data showed that interacting with 'other stakeholders' and documenting this was not an easy task. Because researchers were experimenting with different methodologies there was quite a lot of uncertainty, especially (and interestingly) when interacting with employees of institutions. Although internally recording and archiving information about a specific artwork in a collecting institution may be challenging, the institution is an extremely important source for understanding artworks. Following this observation we decided to have a closer look on existing institutional practices related to this issue.

Survey discussion - Follow-up survey about institutional practices

At the institutions you investigated, did you find that staff systematically collect information from stakeholders other than artists as a part of their conservation strategy?
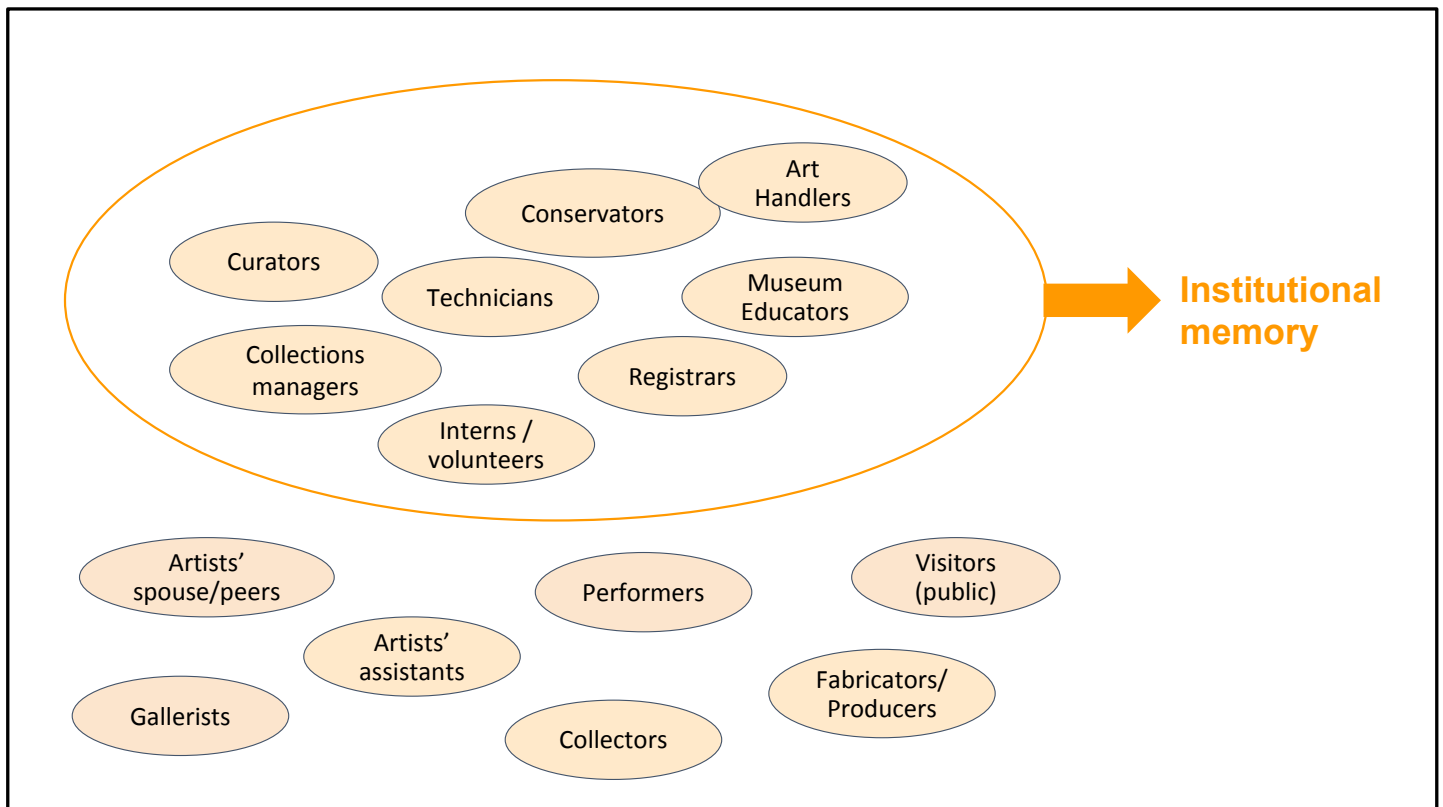

"(...) the director of the museum (...) in several discussions with the museum team expressed her interest in (...) arranging a series of interviews with senior installation technicians. The technicians were soon to retire and the director was stressing the importance of archiving their knowledge of specific complex artworks, acquired throughout the years of installing those artworks for different exhibitions."

"If there is not enough money to conduct artist interviews, there is even less for interviewing other stakeholders."

For this purpose we decided to conduct a shorter, follow-up survey. It aimed to examine if systematic collection of information from stakeholders other than the artist is a part of the institutional workflow of any of the researched institutions. Interestingly only 3 of 15 researchers said that they encountered such practices. From these three cases two referred to external actors (such as galleries or communities involved). Only one intent was related to the knowledge produced internally within the institution. Some of the respondents expressed pragmatic concerns: "If there is not enough money to conduct artist interviews, there is even less for interviewing other stakeholders."
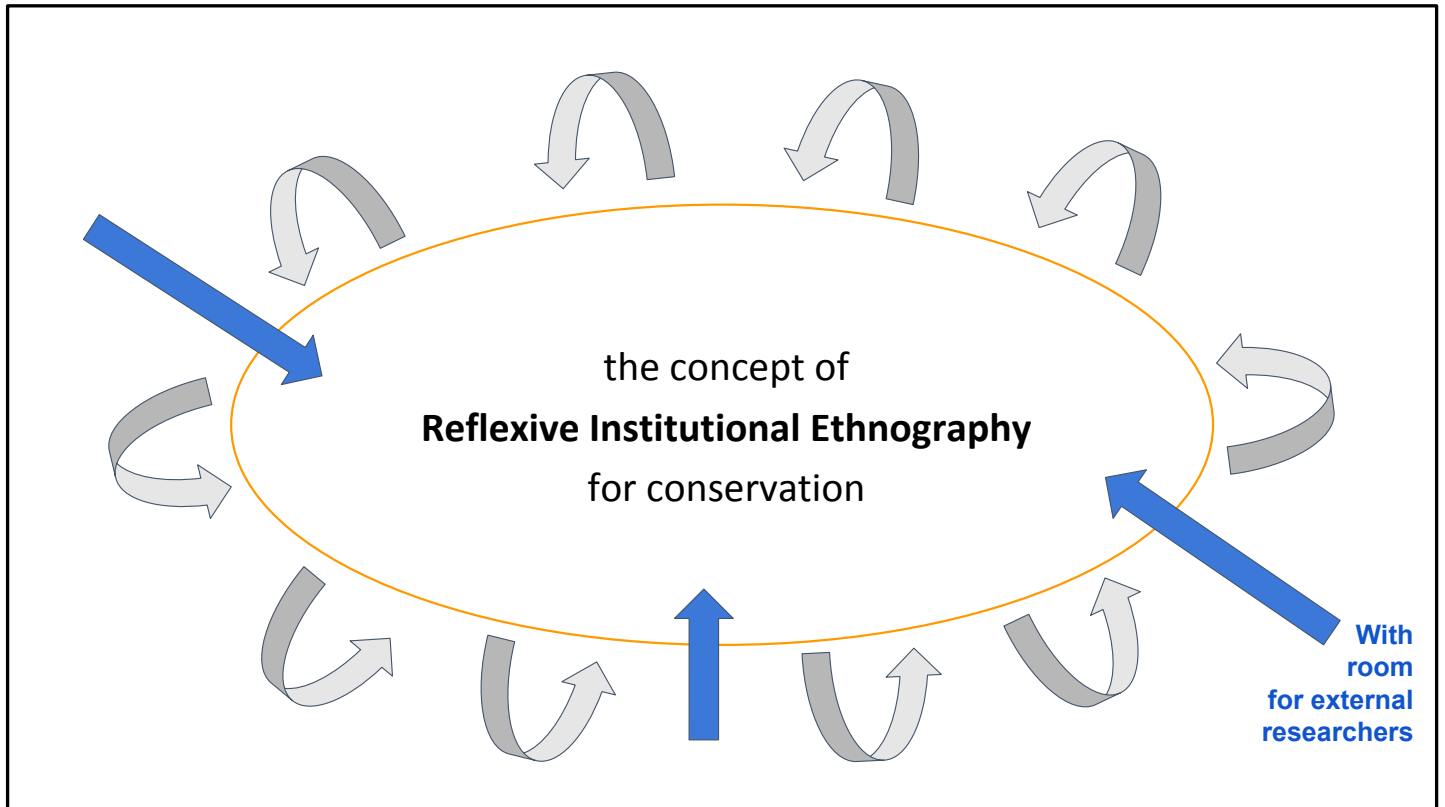
Our research revealed not only the volume of stakeholder interviews but also the lack of an institutional framework within institutions to document and account for the information and knowledge held by these stakeholders.

In many of the biographical phases of an artwork, the artist is of course not the only voice of knowledge and authority regarding the processes that affect an artwork and its care; and this is an observation that resonates with what we have observed during our investigations. External parties such as artists' assistants, fabricators, performers, galleries, and the public hold a wealth of information, however, limited time and resources make collecting and documenting the knowledge of external stakeholders a difficult task.

As we have seen in research by Vivian Van Saaze, Sanneke Stigter, and others, the experiences and knowledge of collection care professionals and other museum practitioners constitute vital elements of an artwork's biography. But it can be just as difficult to document the voices of these internal stakeholders. The knowledge and expertise of these practitioners within museums (registrars, technicians, curators and others) can be thought about in terms of institutional memory. Institutional memory is held collectively by individuals and, as such, it is vulnerable to erosion as memories become hazy and staff move on from institutions.

the concept of
Reflexive Institutional Ethnography
for conservation

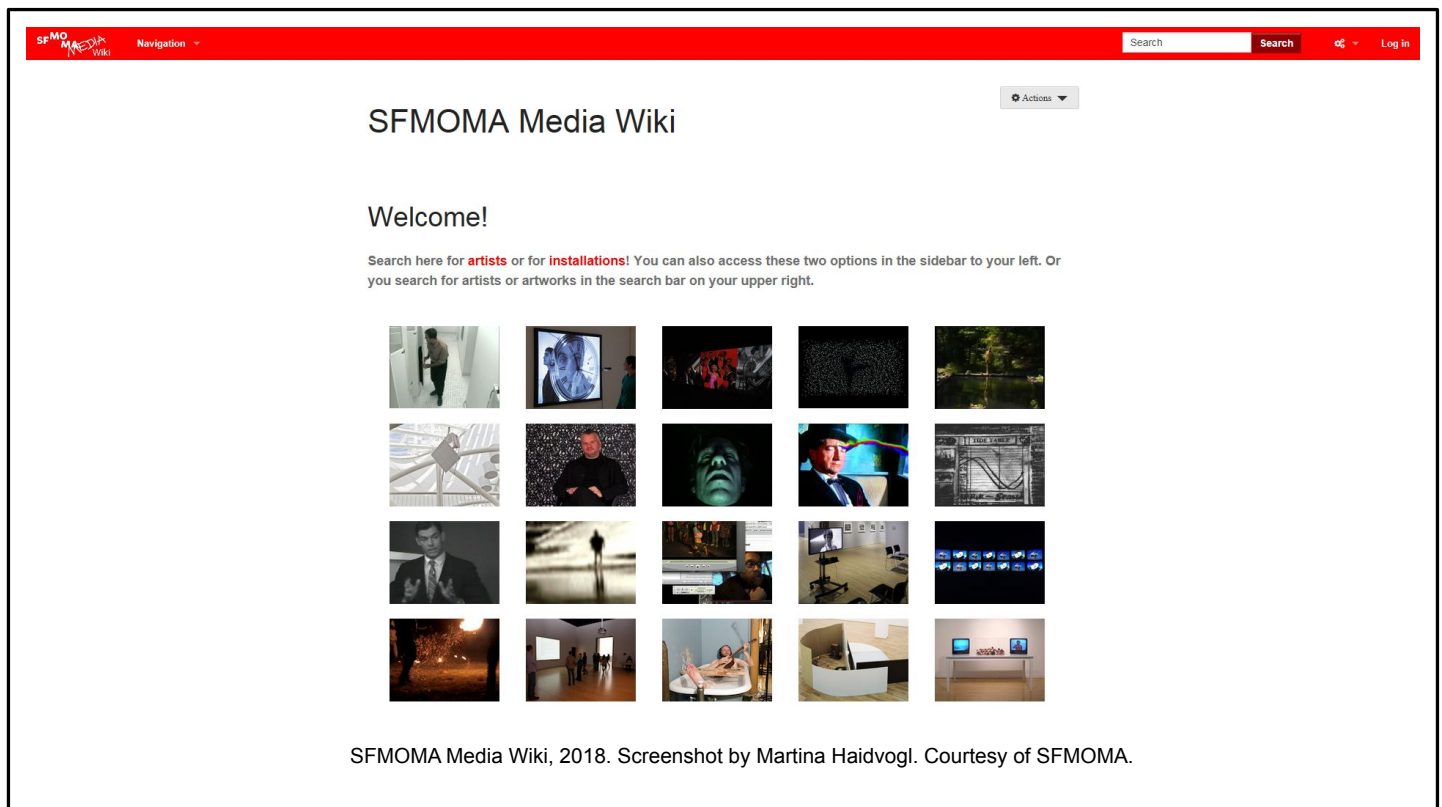**With room for external researchers**

While the reliance of certain works of contemporary art upon institutional memory is acknowledged, our survey results indicate that we lack systematic practices for collecting and documenting this knowledge and information, for ensuring this institutional memory. In light of these results, we propose a concept of reflexive institutional ethnography for conservation.

Documenting institutional memory and the complex ecosystems that have produced and sustained contemporary artworks is not something that can be done by simply recording interviews with staff members. It also entails that an institution critically and reflexively examine its structures and practices. What are its ethics and values, how are these manifested in practice, what are the learned and shared ideas and patterns of behaviour in the institution and how do those affect artworks?

That is what distinguishes something like Sanneke Stigter's 'auto-ethnography' from simply interviewing staff members - what is uncovered and understood during the research process gets incorporated straight back into practice in a reflexive feedback loop.

The goal is to promote reflexive and critical professional practice within collecting institutions, but a crucial aspect of this framework also accounts for and accommodates contributions of external researchers like the NACCA researchers who bring different expertise and different perspectives, as well as funding and time to conduct research.

SLIDE 24

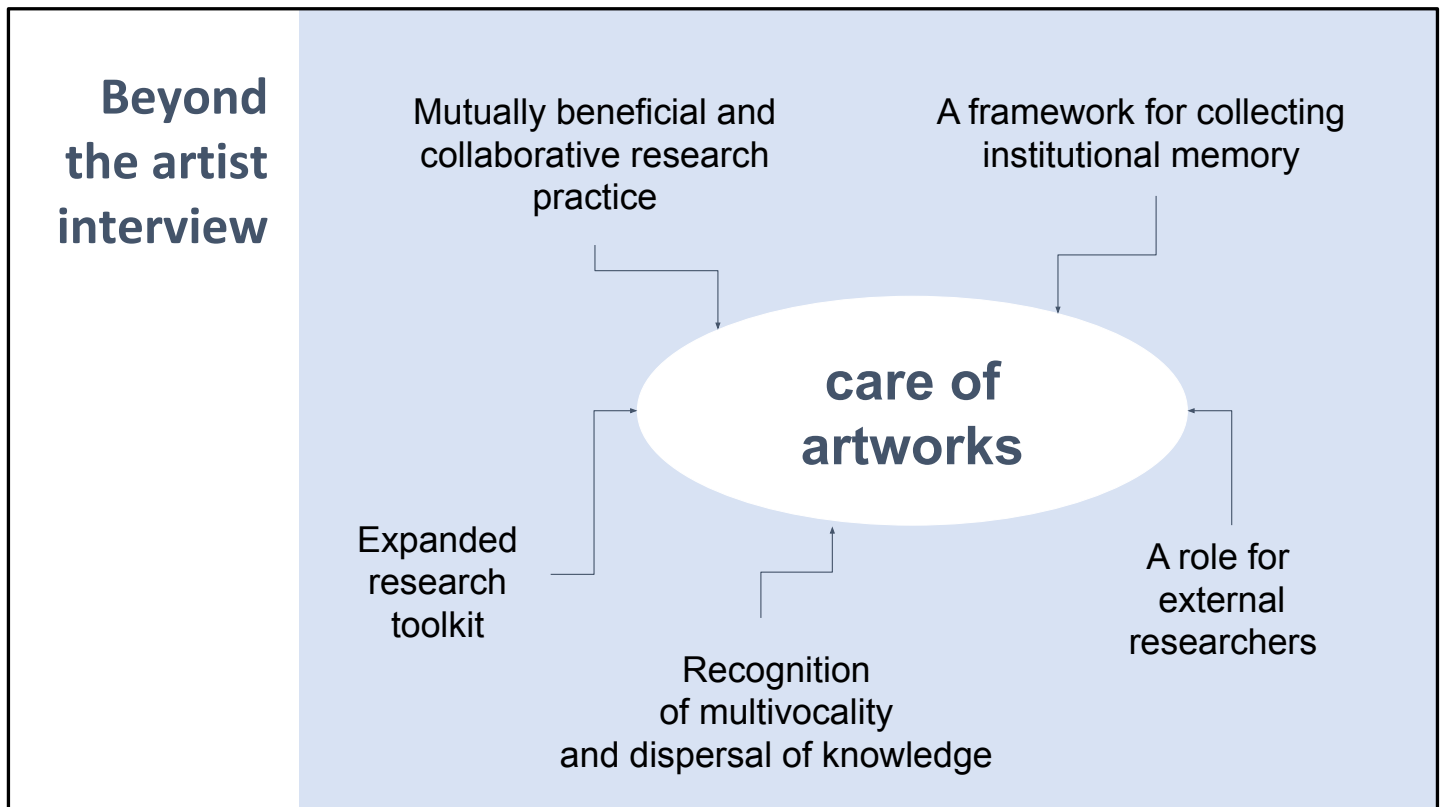SFMOMA Media Wiki, 2018. Screenshot by Martina Haidvogl. Courtesy of SFMOMA.

The absence of systematic collection of this knowledge and information as part of the institutional workflow does not by any means indicate this issue is not being recognised or addressed. Rather, we suggest that just as information is dispersed across different departments, reflexive practices and sharing of institutional memory tend to lack a unifying framework.

We'd like to share an example of implementation of a framework that enables reflexive institutional ethnography that one of our researchers encountered - SFMOMA's Media Wiki:

Building upon its efforts to collect and combine artwork documentation in physical binders, dossiers, SFMOMA has been pioneering the use of a web-based documentation system based on MediaWiki. Spearheaded by a working group for cross-departmental dialogue, Team Media, the platform has proved to be flexible enough to let the institution adjust its documentation workflow to meet the demands of complex artworks while recording their knowledge in the system. Going beyond the paradigm of data entry, the platform affords conservators and staff the opportunity to articulate a narrative and assemble institutional memory.

This model demonstrates a capacity to record context, and to support and encourage and value critical reflection - to implement reflexive institutional ethnography in practice, and to integrate it into institutional workflows. If anyone is taking similar steps to record institutional memory about their artworks by interviewing internal practitioners or is planning to, please let us know during the question session or grab one of us during the breaks; we'd love to hear what initiatives are out there already.

Beyond the artist interview

Mutually beneficial and collaborative research practice

A framework for collecting institutional memory

care of artworks

Expanded research toolkit

A role for external researchers

Recognition of multivocality and dispersal of knowledge

It is widely acknowledged that information and knowledge that is both valuable and essential for the conservation of works of contemporary art is dispersed between a range of stakeholders, both within and beyond collecting institutions. Our aim in this presentation was to draw attention to the fact that despite this widespread acknowledgement we encountered limited (systematic) institutional practices that enable the documentation of institutional memory and inhibit its erosion.

Processes of reflexive ethnography offer one possible framework through which we can record this, and capture both information from interviews and information not readily accessible through interviews alone. Emulating methods from the field of ethnography facilitates examinations of current practices, and identification of shared understandings that affect artworks.

This framework provides for the critical reflexive practice of conservators and other museum practitioners to be implemented as part of institutional workflows. External researchers also play a part– they have a complementary liminal role in reflexive institutional ethnography. Given issues of research ethics may arise with sharing the work of external researchers, we suggest that this may be done with a filter of confidentiality.The framework of reflexive ethnography is informed by the notion that research should be mutually or multiply beneficial and collaborative. This is something that we, as a cohort of external researchers, are especially conscious of: we believe our research records and generates valuable

information and knowledge, and we feel it is our responsibility as researchers to ensure that this benefits the institutions and artworks we have studied, and to recognise and contribute to the epistemic and research capacities of collecting institutions.

Thank you for your attention!

With special thanks to research partners, participating institutions, and to those who designed the NACCA project and worked hard to make it happen

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