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Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*

Pages: 13-24

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ISSN (print version) 2169-379X

ISSN (online version) 2169-1290

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www.conservation-us.org

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). It is a conference proceedings volume consisting of papers presented in the OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings.

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This article is published in the *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*. It has been edited for clarity and content. The article was peer-reviewed by content area specialists and was revised based on this anonymous review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein, however, rests solely with the author(s), whose article should not be considered an official statement of the OSG or the AIC.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: INSTITUTING THE HIRSHHORN ARTIST INTERVIEW PROGRAM

GWYNNE RYAN AND STEVEN O'BANION

It is becoming widely recognized among conservation professionals that artist interviews play an essential role in the conservation of modern and contemporary artworks. Artists continue to push boundaries by exploring unconventional materials and fabrication techniques. Further considerations have arisen with the advent of installation and conceptual art. Communication with the artist is often necessary to elucidate not just how a work was made but also which components or qualities are central to its meaning, thus requiring preservation. In 2012, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden was awarded a Smithsonian Postgraduate Fellowship in conservation to develop an artist interview program for the institution. Although primarily driven from a preservation perspective, the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program was a museum-wide initiative with the goal of generating systematic face-to-face dialogues with artists. This article explains the motivations behind the creation of the interview program, the challenges that arose during its development, and the future of the program as it becomes integrated into the daily workflows of the conservation lab and the museum as a whole. As a practical example of the ways in which artist interviews can play into treatment choices, the conservation of an installation by Ann Hamilton is presented.

KEYWORDS: Ann Hamilton, Artist interview, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

1. ARTIST INTERVIEWS AT THE HIRSHHORN

Among conservation professionals, there is a growing consensus that information obtained through collaboration with artists and their studios can be essential in addressing the long-term care of contemporary artworks. Involving the artist's voice in the care of his or her work is not a new concept at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, where the conservation files are populated with notes and correspondence from artists that date back to the opening of the museum in 1974. Today, these types of collaborations play a significant role in the overall approach to the conservation of the collection.

Artist-conservator collaborations can range significantly in duration from short interactions to lengthier ones lasting several years. However, in most cases, these collaborations are considered to be ongoing in the sense that relationships are being established over time, through multiple and widely varied formats of interaction that are as individual as the artists themselves.

In tandem with the growing practice of engaging with artists comes the responsibility to capture and manage this information in a meaningful way. Providing future caretakers with access to this content along with an appropriate degree of context to allow for informed decisions regarding an artwork's preservation is also important. Unlike the many informal means of communication that occur when collaborating, an artist interview, when structured as a formal dialogue, lends itself to being recorded and archived in a systemized way.

2. WHY DEVELOP A PROGRAM?

Increased emphasis on artist collaborations in the everyday activities in the conservation lab at the Hirshhorn required a shift from the ad hoc manner in which interviews were being carried out. It was recognized that a more organized and thoughtful process for conducting and capturing these important dialogues needed to be developed in a manner that would be more congruent with documentation standards for routine lab practices. Consequently, the logistical considerations required to conduct these interviews were examined with an emphasis on funding, staff, equipment, and time. It became clear that

the necessary planning and coordination among a variety of people, maintenance of equipment, and management of post-interview data generated would require significant resources.

As a result of this realization, the goal became the development of an interview program within the conservation laboratory that would enable interviews to be conducted as a normal part of the acquisition, exhibition, and treatment processes. The establishment of new protocols would also be developed to make these discussions available to future caretakers of the collection in a format that could be easily accessed. The challenge was to build a sustainable program in a cost-effective manner that would satisfy the needs of the museum. In 2012, Steven O'Banion joined the Hirshhorn through a Smithsonian Postgraduate Fellowship in conservation to address this challenge.

3. INITIAL PLANNING

The first step in conceiving how to shape an artist interview program at the Hirshhorn was to examine other successful interview programs. Whenever possible, conversations were set up with the individuals who founded or managed these interview programs. The aim was to hear the thought processes and considerations that were taken into account when structuring a program to fit a particular institution's needs. Through these discussions, two significant commonalities emerged. First, the programs were designed to fit the existing workflows of the institutions; second, they utilized existing resources.

Although the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program is preservation oriented and driven by the conservation department, it began as a museum-wide initiative. It was clear that if an interview program were to be successful, it would need internal museum support and thus also benefit other departments. As such, a committee was established consisting of members from several museum departments to steer the program.

Among the committee members, it was decided that the Hirshhorn's goal was to build relationships with artists over time rather than framing artist interviews as a one-time opportunity to nail down an artist's response to a list of questions. The committee also defined the scope of the program and established criteria for prioritizing interviewees. There was consensus that the program should focus on artists who are either represented in the Hirshhorn's collection or those whose work is in the process of being acquired. In addition to the artists themselves, individuals associated with the artists were also identified as potential interviewees. Studio assistants, family members, and gallerists may have different perspectives or specific information.

Prioritization of which artists to interview was based on a range of criteria. The committee acknowledged the importance of reaching out to artists who are advancing in age. Curators on the steering committee pointed out that many institutions tend to overlook Washington, DC-based artists, and therefore local artists were targeted as well. Further, Jill Sterrett, the Director of Collections at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, noted that a work of art receives the most attention when it is acquired, goes on loan, or is installed (Sterrett, pers. comm.). Thus, it was agreed that the Hirshhorn would take advantage of the momentum of these moments. Finally, considering that there was only a modest budget to pay for travel and lodging expenses for interviewees to come to the Hirshhorn, noting when artists represented within the collection were visiting the Washington, DC area was important.

Numerous interdepartmental collaborations contributed to the success of the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program. For example, the programs department had already established a "Meet the Artist" lecture series, which regularly brings artists to the museum. On many occasions, the curatorial department worked in tandem with conservation when planning and conducting these interviews. The communications department helped to brand the program and, when appropriate, incorporated clips from the interviews into the museum's webpage and social media platforms. Portions of many of the interviews were then shared with the education department to augment the training of the Hirshhorn's interpretive guides.

4. LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Once the goals and scope of the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program were defined, there were workflows to develop and numerous logistical considerations to resolve. To address these considerations, once an interview subject had been identified, a preparatory meeting would be set up among museum staff members who had an interest in the interview. The meetings often would start with brainstorming the types of information that the group hoped to gather from the interview. The aims of the interview then guided subsequent decisions.

The format of each interview would be selected based on the desired outcomes. It was important first to consider whether a written communication, phone call, or informal or formal interview would best achieve these goals. Selection of the interviewer depended largely on identifying those most familiar with the artist and his or her work. In some instances, having two interviewers was deemed beneficial, as both interviewers could bring their expertise to the discussion. When picking the venue for an interview, having the artworks in question on hand or installed whenever possible was prioritized. This ability to look at and examine the artwork together with the artist often facilitated discussion about specific elements relating to its manufacture or its condition, as the presence of the artwork would often serve to jog the artist's memory. In addition to hosting interviews at the Hirshhorn, interviews were also conducted in artists' homes and studios, as these familiar environments often assisted in making the artists feel more comfortable than they might in the foreign environment of a conservation lab or conference room.

Amassing all of the equipment necessary to record interviews that varied greatly in their format, number of participants, and locations was particularly challenging, especially on a tight budget. One of the first pieces of equipment purchased was a small, easy-to-use audio/video recorder, as its portability was well suited to an informal interview. The video camera can capture non-verbal situations, such as when an artist points to a specific location on a work or image in a book. Further, the discrete device is less intimidating than the cameras and lights needed for a production-quality video.

When higher-quality video recording was required, two digital single-lens reflex cameras and lights were used, which the Hirshhorn already owned for photo documentation. The cameras recorded fairly high definition video and were user friendly. These qualities were helpful, as often it was essential to delegate the filming and operation of equipment to interns or assistants less familiar with camera technologies. In addition, having two cameras was found to be an asset, in terms of covering multiple angles of a complicated recording environment, such as a gallery or studio. Even in arranged interview settings, it was advantageous to have two angles to cut between during the editing process (fig. 1).

The ability to capture clear audio during an interview was prioritized. Although ambient audio recorders work well in controlled environments, like an empty auditorium, they can pick up a lot of background noise in less controlled settings, such as a gallery with an echo or a public space. As a result, a wireless microphone system was purchased that greatly expanded the types of locations where the interview could be recorded successfully.

Prior to every interview, test recordings were made with the designated equipment. Based on the quality of the recordings, adjustments would be made if necessary. After each interview, the equipment used was recorded in a log along with comments about what worked well and what did not. This log could then be referred to when planning what equipment to select for future interviews.

When requesting an interview, one person would be designated as the point of contact. That person would extend the initial invitation, concisely stating the purpose and intended use of the interview. Also at this time, permission would be requested to record the interview. Several days prior to the interview, the interviewee would be contacted with specific details. On occasion, a list of topics that the interviewer hoped to discuss or, in a few instances, specific questions would be sent ahead of the interview. This was especially important if there were technical questions that needed clarification, thus giving the interviewee a chance to prepare.



Fig. 1. Example of an interview setup with one camera directed at the artist and a second capturing the interviewers as well. (Courtesy of Steven O'Banion)

Post-interview considerations were equally as important as the pre-planning. The interviewee was asked to sign a release form, which reflected the intended use of the interview as communicated in the initial request. A thank-you note was sent after each interview. In addition to being a requisite civility, the note often provided a way to extend the dialogue. For example, this follow-up could be used as a means to elucidate any points that were not clearly addressed during the interview and could also be an occasion to request a second interview.

Recordings were backed up and converted to an archival file format. Then the interviews were transcribed. Once the transcript was edited, it was sent back to the interviewee so that he or she had the opportunity to make clarifications or corrections. The recordings, transcript, and release form were archived in a long-term digital asset repository.

5. CASE STUDY: INTERVIEW AS A COMPONENT OF ARTIST COLLABORATION

Prior to initiating the Artist Interview Program, Chief Conservator at the Hirshhorn, Gwynne Ryan, had been working with artist Ann Hamilton for 2 years to create a preservation plan for *Palimpsest*, a work in the Hirshhorn's permanent collection (fig. 2). Utilizing the tools of the newly structured interview process, Ryan and Hamilton summarized their discussions with a recorded face-to-face interview.

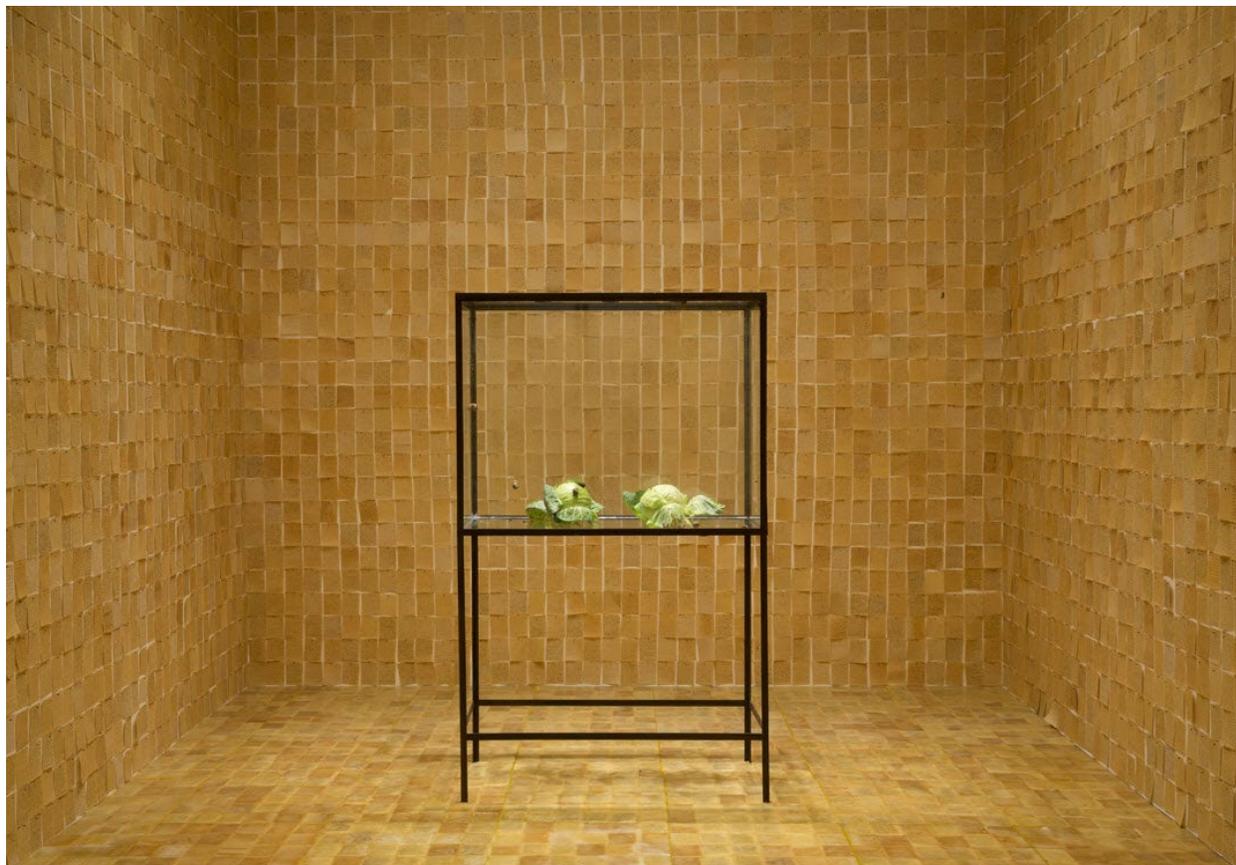


Fig. 2. Installation view. Ann Hamilton, in collaboration with Kathryn Clark, *Palimpsest*, 2004, Pencil on newsprint, map tacks, beeswax tablets, wood shelf, electric fan, steel and glass vitrine, cabbages, snails, dimensions variable, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 04.29 (Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)

Palimpsest is an installation artwork that was collaboratively made by Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark. Originally constructed for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1989, *Palimpsest* was first installed at the Hirshhorn in October 2005. Hamilton has described *Palimpsest* as “a room lined with yellowed newsprint, memories, public and private, penciled by hand on palm-sized paper, rustling in the fan’s rotation, stories embedded in a floor of beeswax tablets, obscured and marked, a vitrine with cabbage heads, stripped and consumed by snails” (Hamilton, unpublished data).

In anticipation of its reinstallation in 2012, learning the meaning behind each of the components was essential in determining the appropriate approach to take toward its preservation. During the many discussions between Hamilton and Ryan that occurred between 2010 and 2012, it became clear that the topic of memory—in the loss of memory and the creation of communal memory—were at the heart of the artwork’s meaning. An example of how this meaning relates to the preservation of the elements in the room is illustrated well by the artist, demonstrated well by the use of an oscillating fan positioned over the entrance to the installation (fig. 3). This fan functions to pass air current across note papers (the written memories) that are pinned to the walls, causing them to lightly flutter. However, the conceptual underpinnings of this element go deeper in that this was not just any fan; it was a fan owned by Hamilton’s grandmother. The artist considers the fan’s connection to her grandmother to be critical to the conceptual meaning of the work and its connections to her own personal memory. Thus, when the fan broke down a few weeks after the opening of the installation, replacing it with another fan was not an option. Instead, Hamilton’s grandmother’s fan was repaired.



Fig. 3. Detail of the artist's grandmother's oscillating fan that is essential to the conceptual aspects of the artwork (Courtesy of C. Carver)

In contrast, the artist does not fetishize many of the other components in the room. For example, Hamilton noted that the vitrine that holds the snails and cabbages may be refabricated if needed, as long as it is made to the same dimensions and has a similar general appearance. In addition, although Hamilton would prefer that snails were used in the vitrine, she has provided the option that slugs be used considering the challenges encountered in obtaining snails in the Washington, DC area. Even the dimensions of the room are variable, within limits. Hamilton offered the option of building a room to line up with the coffers in the Hirshhorn's ceiling, giving the space a trapezoidal, rather than rectangular, footprint.

The beeswax floor proved to be another topic of concern, as beeswax is not a material that holds up well under foot traffic, becoming sticky and embedded with the materials that are tracked into the gallery. During the initial 2005 installation at the Hirshhorn, the wax quickly became a logistical nightmare for the conservators on staff charged with keeping it clean. In fact, much of the preliminary discussion with Hamilton in preparation for the 2012 installation was motivated by the desire to prevent this cleaning/maintenance issue of the wax floor. After consultation with the artist, a water-based, matte polyurethane coating was applied to the floor, fulfilling both the artist's request that any coating used not disrupt the appearance of the wax and the conservators' goal in having a reversible coating (that can be pulled up with tape after the artwork is deinstalled) that protects the wax below. Just as importantly, the coating made the installation much easier to maintain.

The atypical preservation plan for the handwritten notes that line the walls of the installation was a direct result of the recorded interview between Ryan and Hamilton. These notes presented multiple

preservation challenges due to their inherent fragility, consisting of ephemeral newsprint paper that the artist had artificially aged in the sun to achieve a yellowed appearance. As mentioned previously, these papers are pinned to the wall and are meant to flutter in the air current generated by the oscillating fan while on display. The aged newsprint on which the notes are written is an inherently ephemeral material, and even if stored at low temperatures in the dark, the notes will eventually degrade to the point that they will not be able to be displayed in this format (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Detail of note papers pinned to the wall, fluttering in the current caused by the fan (Courtesy of C. Carver)

Conceptually, the handwritten notes on the paper also have significance because they are intricately tied to the conveyance of communal memory. The text of the notes is handwritten in graphite by about 50 of Hamilton's friends and acquaintances of varying ages, including notes written by her mother. The writings that fill the front of each sheet are either memories that are personal to the writer of the note or are excerpts from memoirs, biographies, or autobiographies, signifying the transference of memory from author to reader during the process of being copied onto the notes.

Having access to the artist, in conjunction with an upcoming installation, provided the opportunity to inquire about a preservation plan for the notes. Hamilton indicated during the recorded interview a distinction between "preservation" of the artwork and "keeping the piece alive" as two diverging but equally important actions. Preservation, from a materials standpoint, can be achieved by storing the original notes in cold storage and caring for them as long as is possible. The action of keeping the artwork "alive" could involve the fabrication of new notes, written by people of different generations absorbing the memory of a text by writing it on new notes. In this way, the true spirit of the artwork would be reflected and preserved, as the process of creating communal and generational memory can be continued. To achieve this goal, Hirshhorn conservators enlisted the help of teens participating in the Hirshhorn's ArtLab+ program, as well as museum docents and interpretive guides who represent an older demographic. New note papers were prepared in accordance with instructions provided by the artist. However, the new note papers were dyed to match the original papers rather than artificially aged as a measure to mitigate the rate of degradation.

The blank papers were given to the museum docents, guides, and teens, who then composed new notes that met the artist's specifications. To distinguish the new notes from the artist-provided originals, the writer's name and the date were recorded on the back of each new note. After curatorial review, these notes will be incorporated along with the originals into *Palimpsest* the next time the work is installed.

In addition to summarizing years of informal conversations, the face-to-face interview led to a defined preservation plan for *Palimpsest*. Parameters were set regarding which elements of the installation are variable and which are fixed. The resultant guidelines clarified many of the ambiguities that existed between the conceptual and physical aspects of the work. The interview also gave authorization for conservators to create new note papers in the spirit of the installation, a preservation tactic that would not have been considered without the artist's suggestion. These recorded details will guide future generations as they continue to care for and install Hamilton's work.

6. POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Since the end of O'Banion's fellowship in 2014, Hirshhorn conservators have continued to review the processes and identify the positive outcomes of this project. A primary positive outcome is that the laboratory is now outfitted with the equipment necessary to record a wide variety of interview formats, ranging from the casual to the formal.

As a result of conducting so many interviews over a relatively short period of time, the ability to move through a good portion of the learning curve was able to occur fairly rapidly. This learning curve not only encompassed the logistical planning considerations involved but also the evaluation of interviews that seemed to result in richer dialogue. This last point is worth emphasizing, as recorded interviews are an artificial type of conversation that do not necessarily encourage relaxed, open dialogue. The staged format of seating the artist and interviewer in a formal studio-lighted setting is utilized less, as the dialogue is found to be much richer when the setting and format is more organic (fig. 5). However, this may sacrifice the ability to utilize the footage for interdepartmental uses (e.g., communication or education departmental needs for social media dispersal) and is therefore a decision made on a case-by-case basis.



Fig. 5. Interview with artist Seibren Versteeg (center) in his Brooklyn studio, providing a relaxed and familiar atmosphere where richer dialogue can emerge (Courtesy of C. Carver)

In many cases, like that of the aforementioned Hamilton interview, these recorded discussions can be quite useful as a way to recap previous conversations that have occurred over the course of a more long-term collaboration. Here the established rapport lends itself well to reducing the disarming impact that an audio/video recording setup can have on the exchange (fig. 6). However, this interview format may not be considered appropriate or feasible in all situations.

Another benefit that emerged through the development of the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program is that the processes put in place around the setup and planning of an interview resulted in greater collaboration with other departments in the museum. Due to the overall collaborative nature of the program, the step of carrying out an interview became a factor of the museum's acquisitions and exhibition project team discussions. Now included in the same kinds of conversations where discussions relating to arrangements for shipping of a new acquisition or pedestal needs of an exhibition might occur, the question of whether conservation would like to conduct an interview and its timing is also a part of the discussion.

7. CHALLENGES

The implementation of an artist interview program has brought several challenges to light. The most immediate challenge is one of resources, as existing staff is required to manage and oversee the program. Orchestrating the various participants, schedules, transcriptions, and archiving process is a significant additional workload. As a result, identifying those on the Hirshhorn staff with the skill sets required to

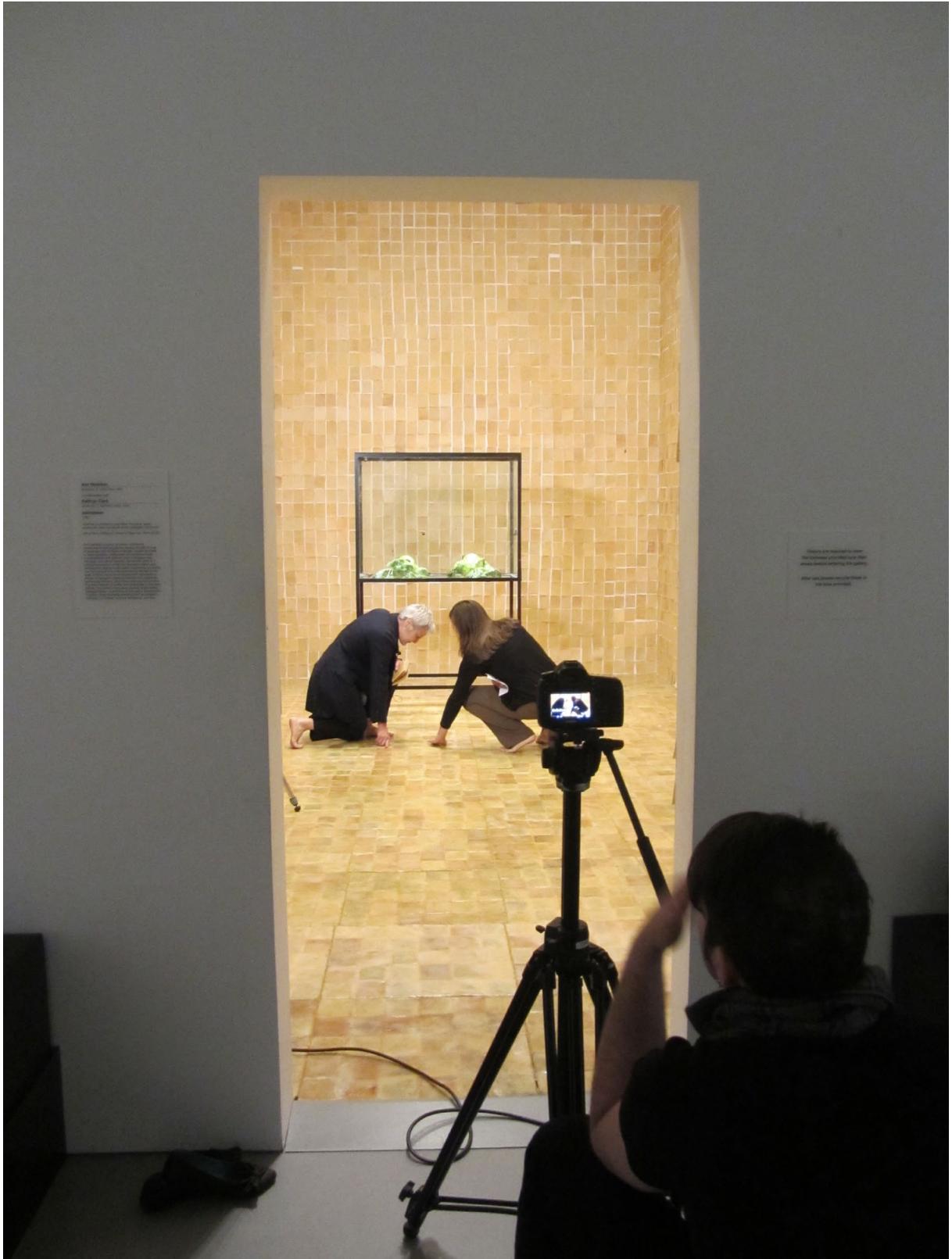


Fig. 6. Interview between Hamilton and Ryan discussing *Palimpsest*, providing an example of using an interview to recap the discussions that have occurred over the duration of a multiyear collaboration. (Courtesy of C. Carver)

keep the workflows running smoothly is an ongoing process. Currently, management of this program has been assigned to the Variable Media Conservator Briana Feston-Brunet, as archiving of the video and audio files and management of equipment is similar to workflows associated with the care of the media art collection. However, each conservator is responsible for initiating and scheduling his or her own interviews. The assignment of these additional tasks can be challenging for an already busy museum staff and is not necessarily a sustainable model.

Another topic that the Hirshhorn Artist Interview Program has brought to the fore is the process of disseminating interview documentation. Within the conservation field, there exists a general trend in prioritizing the sharing of research, analysis, and knowledge. As such, there is advocacy for the information gathered from an interview to be dispersed. The benefits of sharing the information gained from an artist interview is evident, as the various interviews are building a broader body of knowledge about the artworks in the collection. However, although a release form may be in place, the conservation profession has not had the opportunity to fully process the ramifications of disseminating such collaboratively created records, leaving a question as to what degree of sharing may or may not be appropriate.

The information obtained during an interview is based on a foundation of trust with the interviewee, who may not necessarily have a clear stance on the degree to which this information can or should be shared. Therefore, it has been important to reflect on the ability to ensure that specific requests about confidentiality can actually be met. In a digital age, it becomes even harder to ensure that transcripts and files are not shared without permission.

In sum, while conservators are forging collaborative projects, carrying out recorded interviews puts one into an interesting territory. While looking to other professions such as anthropology, oral history, ethnography, and journalism for guidance is largely helpful, there will be both legal and ethical considerations unique to conservation because of the complicated network of relationships among artists, conservators, institutions, private collectors, and galleries. It is important to remain aware that conservators are part of a larger picture that involves various stakeholders with different goals and priorities. Indeed, this will impact and influence the way the field of conservation will set up its best practices over time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Steven O'Banion for all of his work and research and for putting in place a framework to coordinate, capture, and archive these interviews. We would also like to thank Susan Lake for supporting the project and Nicholas Kaplan for sharing his technical knowledge. This project would not have been possible without the Smithsonian Office of Fellowships and Internships Conservation of Museum Collections Program and the Smithsonian Office of the Chief Information Officer.

SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Sennheiser G3 SK 100 Wireless Microphone System with ME-2 microphone, Zoom Q3HD Handy Video Recorder (discontinued)

B&H Photo
420 9th Ave.
New York, NY 10001
800-221-5743
<https://www.bhphotovideo.com>

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