Archiving The Immaterial: Old Problems, New Challenges
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1 Lecture given by Hans Belting at the conference 'L'Idea del Museo: Identità, Ruoli, Prospettive', 13-15 December 2006, which was organised by the Musei Vaticani in the context of the festivities of 500 years of the Vatican Museums 'Quinto Centenario dei Musei Vaticani, 1506-2006'.

For a long time, art museums seemed to have been born with a secure identity, safeguarded by their designation to exhibit art and even to provide it with the necessary ritual of visibility. Yet now, as we embark upon the global age, they face a new challenge'.[1] Social transformations, globalisation, mobility and migrations are imposing changes on the roles and uses of museums, art objects and contemporary artistic practices. We are living in a time when a significant part of artistic production is moving towards practices ever more hybrid and immaterial. In a globalised context, new practices and strategies are questioning artistic activity oriented towards the production of physical objects and the primacy of formal aspects; rather, they are focusing on the artistic process itself. In that process, the artist as researcher gathers pre-existing archive materials at the same time as creating new documents. Similarly, the actions and activities that the artist performs within their research process are captured and documented by the institutions that house them. We find ourselves confronted by a new constellation of documentary typologies, traces of a complex process that undoubtedly has its historic roots in the conceptual art of the end of the Sixties.

The concept of de-materialisation as applied to art was coined by John Chandler and Lucy Lippard in their seminal paper 'The Dematerialization of Art', published in 1968 in *Art International*. Their thesis maintained that a defining step in artistic production had occurred during the Sixties, from art prioritising the object and the physical and visual, to art motivated essentially by the 'idea' and the thought process. A new art form emerged in two directions: art as idea, and art as action. The former negated matter; the latter put it in movement. From the end of the Sixties, artists have de-materialised and de-objectualised their artistic practices and have transformed them into processes recordable through text, photography, video or directly in data information and documents, which naturally find their place in archives rather than collections.

2 Interview to Harald Szeemann for *Art Press* before the inauguration of Biennale of Venice of 1999. 'A Well-Documented Biennale', *Art Press*, 247, 1999.

As a conscious or spontaneous reaction to the dominant cultural logic, processes of auto-archiving developed, as well as artistic practices that used archival formats and procedures as medium, and which reflected upon the latter. An art of attitudes, concept and de-materialisation, that has continued to evolve and grow; particularly if we think of the more active artistic media currently such as video, expanded cinema, sound experiences, and net art. In addition, as the curator Harold Szeemann observed, a significant proportion of contemporary artists are characterised by their nomadic condition.[2] They can frequently be seen in international exhibitions, and particularly in biennials. Their artistic production has adjusted to this migratory rhythm. Formats adapting best to this purpose are principally photography and video due to their ease of transport and the options of reproduction. It is therefore not random that these formats have thrived in such exhibitions.

We are thus confronted by a much more complex and intangible art than that of the conceptual art of the Sixties, whose traces used to be well-defined documentary objects, results of a meta-artistic thought process. Today, artistic processes, frequently with no defined beginning or end, are generating traces, approaches, and ideas, consisting of a diverse variety of documents from different sources. This information replaces to some extent the traditional, exclusively formal concerns and physical nature of the object of art. Currently, the artist as a researcher, allows himself to speculate in the artistic context which offers him a flexibility that the traditional academic context denies. S/he can speculate without the need to achieve conclusions, in a trial and error attitude that focuses on the process. The artistic act is a work in progress.

This is the case with the artists involved in this project. With Leo Asemota's 'The Ens Project' we encounter an ongoing multipartite artwork interconnecting ideas on the changing self in a dynamic globalised culture. His work encompasses an open range of expressions that include films, photography, sculptures, drawings and performance. A further example is Lawrence Abu Hamdan's work which frequently deals with the relationship between listening and borders, human rights, testimony, truth and law, through the production of audio-visual installations, graphic design, sculpture, photography, workshops and performance.

These transformations are inevitably imposing changes in the use and role of museums which are destined to develop a social role beyond being warrants of the past. Museums are thus changing from homogeneous bodies containing patrimonial objects – historicising machines – to heterogeneous and fluid bodies, generating knowledge. They become a model of effective spaces of mediation and transfer of ideas where it is possible to transcend frontiers between disciplines. The Canadian museologist Duncan Cameron refers to the concept of 'the museum as a forum'.[3]

3   Duncan F. Cameron, 'The Museum, a Temple or The Forum', *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2014

Since the middle of the 20th century the consideration of the art object, based on hermetic categories, has become obsolete, together with the traditional organisation and subdivision of contemporary art collections in departments such as photography, sculpture, painting, etc. Collections are transitioning to hybrid spaces bordering archives and libraries. As Mela Dávila noted in her description of the scope, methods and objectives of the MACBA Study Center, the limit between the former and the latter are becoming blurred and almost disappearing.[4] The dividing line traditionally separating the categories of document and work of art has been overcome by the understanding that both conform to the continuum of a single patrimonial collection.

4   Mela Dávila, 'Es una obra, o es un documento? El Centro de Estudios y Documentación del MACBA', Glòria Picazo (ed.), *Impasse 10: Libros de artista, ediciones especiales, revistas objetuales, proyectos editoriales, ediciones independientes, publicaciones especiales, ediciones limitadas, autoediciones, ediciones de artista, publicaciones digitales …* Lleida: Ajuntament de Lleida, Centre d'Art La Panera, 2011, pp.301-308. For this book, she described the scope, methods and objectives of MACBA Study Center by elaborating on the various theoretical parameters that MACBA is using to guide the expansion of its holdings.

The museum is clearly confronted by a mutation in the meaning of its collections. The document now assumes a prominence previously reserved for the art object; a symptom of the contamination of the archival dialectic by the museal one. Due to the absence of a single and unidirectional narrative configuring the collected objects, the collection turns into an archive through which to transit. Spectators acquire an active role and the ability of constructing multiple narratives. This circumstance equally affects the collecting practices of museums in which documents, testimonies and fragments are fundamental elements. They do not merely represent a

contextualisation of the object of art, but rather belong in their own right to the collection, which is also becoming ever more an archive.

The particularity of archival material stemming from these artistic practices, as well as the process of reactivating it through exhibitions and other systems of visualisation, requires flexible art professionals with multidisciplinary skills. Roles for archive curators or archivists with a curatorial interest are becoming more frequent. The logic systems of both disciplines work together, combining a balance of the apparent objectivity of archival method with the creation of narrative typical of curatorial practice.

The role of the archivist with curatorial interest does not only apply to disseminating and reactivating material once it has been archived in the institution. The research process of artists travels through gathering, classifying and, at times even, describing documents. In this regard, they can rely on the collaboration and perspective of the archivist to reflect the complexity of their creative process. Artists compile pre-existing archival material and generate new material. They incorporate archival practices in their work process. In this regard, we should quote the research developed by MACBA, within the MeLa project, on classification methods and archiving protocols of documents produced by exhibitions, with the aim of identifying good practices and producing recommendations to launch exhibition archives.

5   *Folding The Exhibition.* Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Milano, MeLa Project, 2014.

The publication *Folding The Exhibition* is a product of this research, and is aimed at museums, galleries, researchers and artists.[5] In addition, there is a report of the experience of the close collaboration between the staff of the MACBA archive and the artist Miralda. His ongoing project, 'Food Cultura', which focuses on the study of food has myriad artistic, social, economic and political implications across all cultures and comprises a vast body of actions, collections, publications, exhibitions, projects and restaurants that question common museum protocols. An analysis of this material was produced and compiled by Miralda about his projects and exhibitions that identified the pertinence of establishing standards to classify and describe the materials. The necessity to use an informatic tool designed to reflect the particularities of the creative process became evident and, after this first phase, a database was conceived, designed, and developed to respond to the need of managing the documentary materials of the artist. Currently, the artist is using this system to document the projects, events, exhibitions, objects and documents that surround his artistic practice.

Works such as those of Miralda, Leo Asemota, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, more abstract, blurred and complex than those of the conceptual art of the Sixties as they enter collections and archives, risk falling into artificial categories built by museums. Limits may be set that the artist has not created, corrupting the processes associated with the work. Such new artistic practices, and resulting materials, require a different procedural management of description, visibility and access which is much more fluid and less compartmentalised. Notions of archive and collection need to be revised and this inevitably generates a debate on subjects and aspects that are not easy to address. With the disappearance of the formal aspect, such considerations and thoughts challenge the grounds of current institutional dynamics of acquisition,

documentation, cataloguing, exhibition, conservation and restora-
tion. What challenges does the conservation of intangible works
such as sound art entail? How to preserve works in formats that
become outdated due to the ongoing development of information
technology? What are the issues related to acquisition and docu-
mentation of Internet art?

The analysis of this situation yields a clear conclusion: the difficulties
incurred in the classification, description and visualisation of these
works require different resources to those available to the classical
systems. They need to reflect the complex network of links that
give meaning to elements of status and characteristics so diverse
as those present in contemporary art collections and archives. The
approach and management of a markedly multidisciplinary artistic
production must not be conceived as a static element, but rather
as a set of actions that allow the integrity, function and access to
the works to be maintained. Creating strategies, protocols, tools
and standardised metadata enhancing the conservation and future
access of that information should be a priority. This task should be
performed together with the use of equally multidisciplinary tools
that could overcome the previous focus on the materiality of the
work. The artistic project has to be broken into its different aspects,
which may be physical, conceptual, logical, contextual or related to
interaction with the users, and we should keep in mind that we are
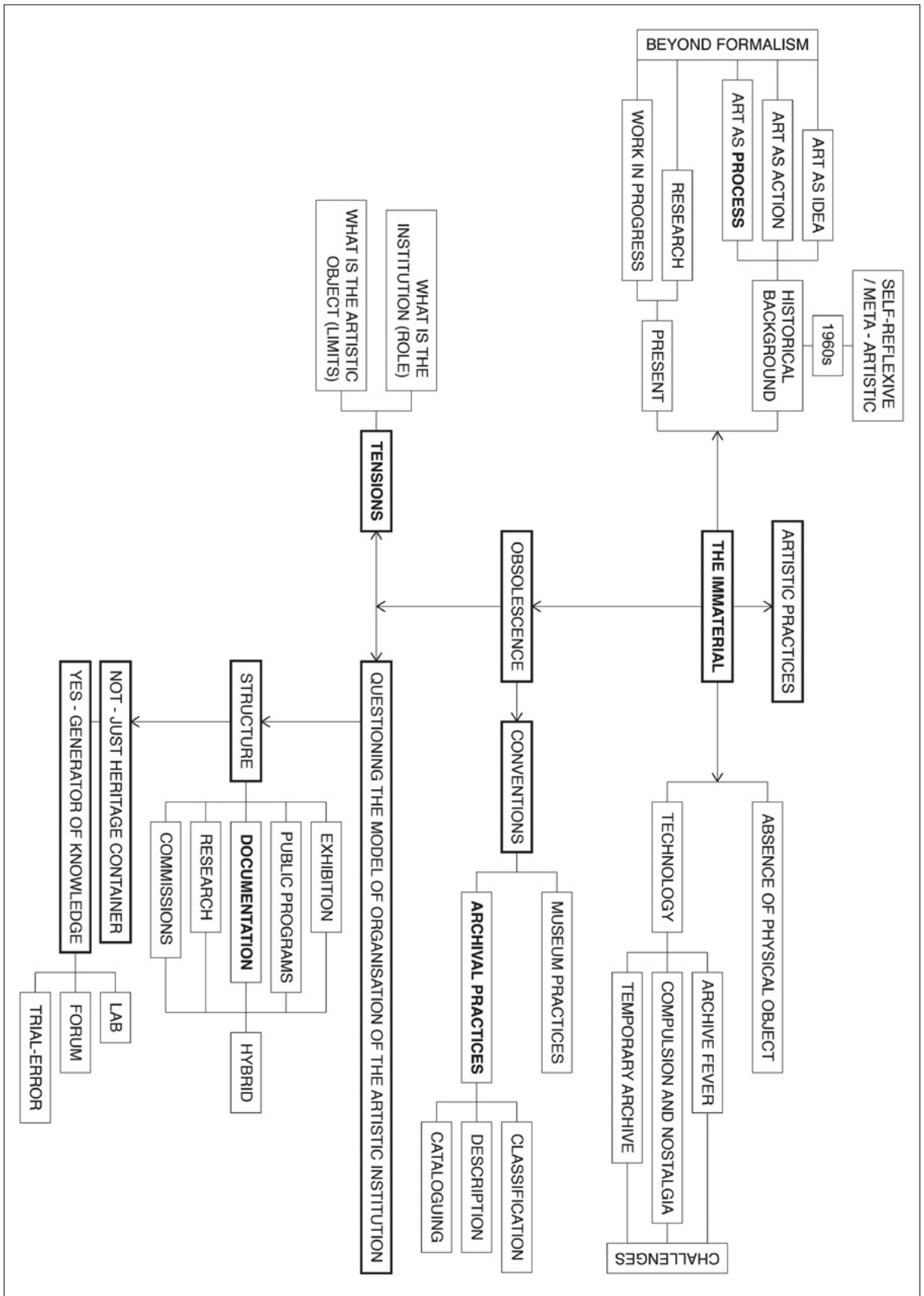not dealing with final outcomes, but with processes.

These difficulties imply a background work of analysis and under-
standing to eventually and ideally enable the documentary data-
bases containing these materials to integrate relationship diagrams
between its elements, and to reflect the ambivalence and complexity
of its materials. Processes becoming works and works becoming
processes, are difficult to completely comprehend by institutions.
In spite of this, we continue to witness attempts by museums to
embrace and acquire these artistic processes at certain stages,
through snapshots, merely representing frozen moments of those
processes. Information technology systems for description and
cataloguing in museums and archives shall evolve from data and
information management systems to more complex systems of
knowledge management. Their role should be to plan, implement
and control all activities related to knowledge and to offer systems
of queries based on creative visualisation methods.

It is becoming evermore necessary for the institution to be in charge
of preserving and transferring knowledge. There is therefore an
urgency to address the new artistic practices with new methods,
tools and approaches, able to provide adequate answers to an
evolving challenge.

This new challenge transforms the museum in the custodian, not of
the object, but of the live meaning of the work, of its wisdom.

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A graphic representation of the concepts and relationships outlined in the text in order to structure ideas and provide a visual summary. Based on the idea of immaterial artistic practices, attending to their historical background and the present context, the diagram indicates the obsolescence of certain museum practices. In particular, it shows the archival challenges and the need for questioning and rethinking the understanding that the art institution is a generator of knowledge rather than a mere receptacle for history

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European Museums
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