

THE CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTING FRANCISCO TROPA'S OEUVRE

VARIABILITY AND INTER- ARTWORKS RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

As part of the “Documentation of Contemporary Art” research project, several installations by Francisco Tropa (b. 1968, Lisbon) were studied. These installations were, at first, part of three different projects initiated by the artist, and later become autonomous and dispersed into several different collections. This paper addresses the documentation process of these installations, regarding both its challenges and the applied preservation methodologies.

Tropa's works are meant to change as part of a living process, creating different trajectories. According to the artist, artworks from the same project establish tangible and intangible relationships among them. The documentation process of such a variable and interconnected *œuvre* presented unpredictable challenges, which ultimately acted as a catalyst to analyze the documentation process itself.

As a result of this analysis, new theoretical frameworks are proposed and the role of the conservator is reflected upon regarding the ways it affects the preservation of variable and interconnected artworks.

KEYWORDS

FRANCISCO TROPA
| DOCUMENTATION | PERFORMANCE-BASED
ARTWORKS | PERFORMATIVITY

RESUMO

No âmbito do projeto de investigação “Documentação de Arte Contemporânea”, foram estudadas diversas instalações do artista português Francisco Tropa (n. 1968, Lisboa). Estas obras fazem parte de três projetos artísticos do autor, que se tornaram autónomas, dispersando-se por várias coleções. O presente artigo reflete sobre o processo de documentação destas instalações, tanto a nível dos desafios colocam como das metodologias aplicadas na sua preservação. Estas obras estão em permanente mudança, criando diferentes trajetórias. Segundo o artista, algumas peças do mesmo projeto estabelecem relações tangíveis e intangíveis entre si, razão pela qual o processo de documentação destas obras apresentou desafios imprevisíveis que serviram como catalisador para repensar o próprio processo. Através desta análise, são propostas novas direções teóricas e o papel do conservador é debatido relativamente à forma como condiciona a preservação de obras variáveis e relacionadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

FRANCISCO TROPA | DOCUMENTAÇÃO, |
OBRAS DE ARTE BASEADAS
EM PERFORMANCE | PERFORMATIVIDADE

Introduction

Since the dematerialization of the art object in the 1960s, conservation theory has been facing new challenges. The ephemeral nature of many contemporary artworks, together with the growing importance of preserving their intangible features, continuously calls for newer conservation methodologies.

As contemporary artworks became multiple, both physically and conceptually, by being composed by several elements and by converging different meanings in the same piece, connections among materials, techniques, and meaning have become more specific and complex.

This increasing complexity — owing to the use of non-traditional materials, the multiplicity of objects and meaning, and the absence of connection between media and representation — has led to new ways of communication and preservation that consider the documentation of the artist's intention, the meaning of materials and techniques, the creative process, and of other essential intangible features (Hummelen 1999). The artwork does not communicate with the audience (and therefore with the conservator) in a straight line, but via a conflicted path full of reinterpretations and even misinterpretations. Nowadays, interviews with artists, their assistants, and other collaborators are encouraged, and conservators consider the artist's discourse to be a window into the soul of the artwork, and into the artist's intentions (Beerkens *et al* 2012). Artists however, may change their discourse with time, and that may also change the way their intentions are perceived by conservators. More recently, Renée van de Vall *et al* proposed a biographical approach to the conservation of contemporary art: artworks do not exist in a single state but rather undertake a trajectory, which is, in itself, part of its existence (van de Vall *et al* 2011). From this perspective, the documentation of the artwork's trajectory is essential because it “may be considered part of conserving the work. Not only because examination of decisions taken in the past and the work's exhibition history underlies sound decisions in the present, but also because each new chapter added today makes decisions transparent for conservators in the future” (van de Vall *et al* 2011, 7). Conservators may influence an artwork's trajectory through their interpretation of previous paths and decisions. According to some authors, conservators might even be acknowledged not only as co-producers, or interpreters, but also as managers of change (van de Vall *et al* 2011; van Saaze 2009).

Within the scope of the research project “Documentation of Contemporary Art,”¹ several complex artworks have been documented. In the study of complex installations by the Portuguese artist Francisco Tropa, the documentation methodologies were scrutinized and the conservator's role was reviewed. This paper aims to reflect upon those issues, while probing for new theoretical frameworks for the preservation of these works. In this process, the challenges involved in the preservation of Tropa's works are detailed, and the documentation process is scrutinized.

Francisco Tropa and his oeuvre

Francisco Tropa, one of the most important Portuguese artists of his generation, works with diverse materials and techniques. His artworks are difficult to define, or even to describe. The materials he uses include sand, water, sound, and wood, and his media vary from performance to installation, sculpture, engraving, film, and slide projection, among others. Although different in conception, shapes, materials and techniques, his artworks are meant to be instruments, mechanisms or devices. These devices are designed to somehow play with the audience, to make spectators think. This happens, for example, when Tropa constructs measurement instruments intended to measure our ideas about art and the world, instead of measuring physical quantities (Menegoi 2012). According to Alexandre Melo (2007), by presenting these enigmas to the audience, Francisco Tropa seeks to question the role of the artist and the nature of the creative process. Moreover, Tropa usually creates big projects, composed by several installations/events, which also comprise other small and autonomous works.

As part of the research project “Documentation of Contemporary Art,” twelve different installations by Tropa were studied and documented. These installations were produced as part of three different projects (*Casalinho*, *L’Orage*, and *The Assembly of Euclid*), which then became autonomous and dispersed into three collections (Serralves Museum, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation – CAM – Centro de Arte Moderna, and Caixa Geral de Depósitos; vide Fig. 1).

Installations have no fixed form or materiality, changing with time and space, and are highly dependent upon spectators’ perceptions. Although these issues were expected in the documentation process of these twelve installations, other unforeseen challenges emerged. First, Francisco Tropa’s works are indeed changing in time and space, not only due to their nature as installations, but also due to the artist’s intentions for them. The artist actively demands change for his works. Second, while initially it was possible to understand that some of these twelve works could be interconnected, it was only during the interviews with the artist that the extent of those connections became clear: not only are those connections at the core of the artist’s creative process, but also they are intrinsically related with the way each work changes. These two characteristics of Tropa’s oeuvre, **intended variability** and **inter-artwork relationships**, were present in all stages of the documentation process, and several questions surfaced: how to document interconnected works and their intended change? To which degree are these works connected, and how do those connections affect each artwork’s biography? How can these works be documented and preserved, while they are at the same time intentionally changing each other’s trajectories? To what extent is the conservator allowed to change a work? And ultimately, where is the borderline between the conservators’ creative actions and the artist’s intentions?

Variability and preservation

The artist Francisco Tropa realizes and expects that his artworks will change in every exhibition. As stated by him, no installation “will ever be assembled twice in the same way.”² His artworks are meant to be infinite in possibilities and interpretations, and are intentionally designed to change. For him, “a good artwork should be in permanent motion, and thus in permanent change.”³

The preservation of Tropa’s artworks demands the preservation of change as a living persistent process. His artworks morph every time they are reinstalled. They are as diverse as the minds that read them. They do not follow a path towards ephemerality but rather to multiplicity, and yet, by continuously changing, they are still as ephemeral as time. The artwork’s biography paradigm emerges. In fact, according to the definition of “artwork’s trajectory” (van de Vall *et al* 2011), it is possible to argue that only a proper documentation can define the limits of acceptability of future change. This documentation needs to regard the artist’s intention and the exhibition history of the works, which should not only comprise a textual compilation of past exhibitions, but also images, videos and oral testimonies. By presenting documents in different media, a complete view of the changes artworks undertake is provided, allowing for more informed decision-making regarding future changes. Although this multimedia approach integrates the conservator’s personal view of the work, it is only through this process that conservators can ensure the proper preservation of the intended change.

Regarding Francisco Tropa’s works, it is interesting to note the remarkable changes they went through over the years. The work *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli* (2003) is an example of how these changes are transversal: not only do they occur from exhibition to exhibition, but they also exist during the exhibition itself.

This piece comprises a table covered by a tablecloth, with several elements on top, including a green bottle and a glass of wine, plates, a bowl, a knife, cheese, several garlic heads, bay leaves, a napkin, apples, grapes and pepper corns. Connected to the table is a suspended stool, on which a set of weights is displayed (see Figures 2-4). In several exhibitions of *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli* (see Figures 2-4), some of these elements changed. In this case, freedom is clearly given by

the artist to the conservator/curator to choose the number of apples, cheese pieces, and garlic heads or, even, to withdraw the napkin. And although those modifications change the materiality of the work, they do not have a significant impact upon the artist's intention of representing everyday life, or the dichotomy between balance and unbalance. During the exhibition itself, on the other hand, organic materials are replaced when they start to show signs of deterioration. This is visible by comparing the images related to the exhibition *Colecção #2 (Francisco Tropa)* held at Culturgest (Lisbon), in 2009 (see Figure 4).

There are other works from Tropa where this intentional variability is clearly visible. This is the case with *Grotto* (2006 — see Figures 5 and 6). This work comprises a glass ampoule, a light projector and several slides. When light is projected through the slides, a grotto is simulated. The projections differ according to the context of the exhibition and the person responsible for assembling it. In this case, the conservator/curator chooses the slide to project and defines the distance between the wall and the glass. The glass ampoule is suspended from the ceiling, and is positioned in front of the light projector. The final projection includes the grotto (produced by the slides), and the ampoule's shadow (Figures 5 and 6). The artist states:

[The glass ampoule] has to be more or less fifteen centimeters from the wall. Between eleven to fifteen centimeters... The outline of the grotto can be a little bigger or smaller (...). I have several slides that can be placed [in the projector]. Some are smaller and others are larger... When using a zooming projector, the length of the light projection is easy to control. You just have to look to some pictures and do more or less the same.⁴

By documenting and reinstalling these works, the conservator is contributing to the artwork's biography not only by documenting the history of the work, including the exhibition history, but also by performing the artist's instructions, actively changing the work's trajectory. From this perspective, it is possible to consider that every conservation action has a degree of authorship.

In the case of Francisco Tropa's works, however, this approach has to be further developed, as his works establish tangible and intangible connections between them. Indeed, those relations, besides being essential for the artworks' meaning, also affect their trajectories.

The preservation of the inter-artworks relationships

There are multiple connections among Francisco Tropa's works. While some can be clearly expressed, others are harder to disclose. At first glance it is possible to understand some of these inter-artwork relationships. For example, as detailed in Figure 1, both *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit — le poids poli* (see Figures 2-4), and *Models for L'Orage* (2002 — see Figure 7) were produced within the same project, *L'Orage*, and hence are related to each other: while the latter is composed of four mockups, representing four different spaces, *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit — le poids poli* is represented in one of those mockups (see Fig. 7). This connection could be quite simple to recognize; however, after the *L'Orage* exhibition, these two artworks became part of two different collections (i.e. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation — CAM, and Caixa Geral de Depósitos), and have never been exhibited together ever since.

With these relationships and the enigmatic nature of his artworks, the artist is giving audiences, and thus conservators and curators, the opportunity to solve riddles. As explained in the interview, "things are installed like this so you can make an effort to discover the reason why."⁵ The artist considers his artworks as "indecipherable enigmas" (Faria 2006), and are meant to be "empty containers" designed to be filled by the spectators' own experiences. Interpreting Tropa's works through their interrelationships is, however, not only demanding for audiences, but also for

conservators. When considering their physical nature, conservators may pay attention to a particular material, color, shape, or technique. Considering intangible relationships, on the other hand, means that conservators have to preserve, for example, the spatial arrangement of the artworks. Moreover, it is very difficult to present, preserve, and document the dual nature of any of these works, which are simultaneously part of a project (and thus part of the project's trajectory), and individual artworks (with their own biography).

According to Tropa, the works that became autonomous from the project *The Assembly of Euclid* (see Figure 1) should be interpreted via their interrelationships because their conceptual frameworks are connected. These works are, however, dispersed into two different collections (Serralves Museum and Caixa Geral de Depósitos) and have never been exhibited together. While *Body* and *Head* were first presented in 2005, at *The Assembly of Euclid* installation,⁶ *Grotto*, *Policemen*, *Sentry*, and *Temple of Allegories*, were exhibited in 2006, at *The Cyclist's Trance*⁷ installation. The films *Snail* and *Giant* were first showed in 2006, at *The Mark of the Breast* installation.⁸ Although these three installations are the core of the project *The Assembly of Euclid*, they were presented in three different occasions and locations.

In addition to the conceptual connections these works establish, they also exhibit tangible relations: *Sentry*, for example, is connected to the work *Body*, and to the film *Snail* (see Figure 8).

The work *Sentry* includes a white sentinel, which is produced by painting white clay on glass. Additionally, the work *Body* shares the material features with the work *Sentry*, by representing a skeleton painted with white clay. These two artworks also share the indexicality of the color white with the film *Snail*, where a white hand also appears. According to the artist:

The sentry is painted with clay... why is the skeleton [of the Body] painted with clay...? You will have to figure out what was painted with clay, what has that particular kind of white... The relations exist where things bind... That is also related to the hands appearing in the film [Snail]... The project [The Assembly of Euclid] is just one thing, made in several steps... This is why it is so complex, because it is a machine of relations.⁹

Indeed, the white clay from *Sentry* and *Body*, and the white hand from *Snail* are related to the very concept of *The Assembly of Euclid* project: the dichotomy between life and death. If the white clay is replaced by white or even yellow acrylic paint, the relationship between the works disappears. In this case, conservation is not just a matter of preserving a specific artwork, but also relies on the preservation of the inter-artwork relationships, by maintaining that particular material and color, and documenting that specific conceptual framework. This task, however, is particularly challenging, since these works do not belong to the same collection. Both *Body* and *Snail* are currently part of the Caixa Geral de Depósitos collection, and *Sentry* belongs to the Serralves Museum collection. Therefore all museums involved need to work together sharing information in order to preserve Francisco Tropa's intention to provide interconnected puzzles to audiences.

Considering this connectivity and the intended variability, which are both characteristic of Tropa's oeuvre, it is important to understand that this network of trajectories affects each work's variability and vice-versa. And although Francisco Tropa's artworks are meant to change as living processes, these changes need to be informed by scrupulous and flexible documentation. This characteristic ultimately acted as a catalyst to rethink documentation methods and strategies, and helped to propose a theoretical framework that can be applied to cases similar to Tropa's challenging artworks (Marçal et al 2013).

Documentation framework

Documenting contemporary works is an essential step for their preservation. When producing this documentation, conservators usually try to provide an as far as possible objective view of the work by carefully detailing its physical characteristics and by analyzing the meanings. In complex installations, such as the ones by F. Tropa, documenting their intended variability and inter-artwork relationships becomes more important than any details about their materiality. Moreover, considering any decision as context-dependent, the documentation step should justify past decisions, based on past contexts, and serve as a foundation for new decisions. For that reason, a detailed justification for any reinterpretation strategy should be registered as part of the work's biography.

Methodologically, the proposed documentation framework consists of three phases: data gathering, data production, and data evaluation, and is part of a decision-making model explained elsewhere (Marçal et al 2013).

In the first step of documentation, conservators gather relevant published and unpublished information regarding the artist and the work under discussion. If information is non-existent in the traditional channels (e.g. catalogs, archives, etc.), other channels (e.g. social networks, blogs, etc.) could be consulted. In the case of Francisco Tropa's *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit — le poids poli*, for example, information found online, namely in personal blogs, proved to be highly important for the artworks' history. Indeed, although it was known that the organic materials on the table should be replaced during the exhibition, there was no documentation to sustain whether that happened in other exhibitions until the image by Susana Pomba (Figs. 3 and 4) was gathered in her blog "Dove's taste of the day" (<http://www.missdove.org/>). With Tropa's *Grotto*, this source of evidence became even more important. The artist explained in the interview that the grotto's projection should change in every exhibition: there are several different slides, with different shapes, that can alter the projection, and it is up to the conservator or curator to decide which slide to use. However, in every published document, from catalogs to flyers of different exhibitions, the image is always the same (Fig. 5). By persistently publishing the same representation of Francisco Tropa's *Grotto*, only one variation of this artwork is recorded, and thus, preserved for the future.

In this case, the most relevant step in data production is the artist interview. The interview provides the conservator a window into the soul of the artwork, into his intentions, and could be tempted to restrict documentation's reach to the limits of the work's physical parts (van Saaze 2009). In the study of the twelve installations by Francisco Tropa, this tool was crucial. The scarce documentation available before the interview included some photos, catalogues, art criticism texts, and basic inventory sheets. With this information it was possible to understand that Tropa's works were distributed by the three artistic projects — *Casalinho* Project, *L'Orage* Project, and *The Assembly of Euclid* Project. As it was impossible to separate the works from the projects, the artist's interviews were based on theme semi-structured interviews¹⁰ (Beerkens et al 2012). It was only after the artist's interviews that the extent of the inter-artworks relationships was disclosed. The theme interview, by studying several works at once, instead of an artwork as an independent entity, allowed for deeper insight into the artworks' interrelationships. All documentation produced about these works not only considered the identification of the artworks, incorporation and legal rights, location, general description, creative process, techniques, materials and their meaning, material description, technical description, exhibition conditions, storage, transportation, and condition (Laurenson 2006), but also reflected upon their exhibition history, interconnected works, and each artwork's biography.

The final step of this documentation framework is data evaluation. This step is of utmost importance, considering that the documentation gathered and produced will be the basis for a conservation decision. After all, as the psychologist S. Plous stated, "good information does not guarantee good decisions, but bad information

pretty much guarantees bad decisions” (Plous 1993: 54). It becomes clear that before making any decision, conservators need to ensure that the available information is reliable enough to support the decision. For that reason, after the interview it is important to critically analyze the artist’s discourse. Considering the importance of the artist interview to the decision-making process, a reference framework for interview data analysis in conservation is proposed (Marçal et al 2013). This framework, based on content analysis, can be of value in the decision-making process, mainly due to its promises of data structuring. With this tool the artist’s discourse can be labeled through the definition of selected categories (e.g. Future re-installations, Past exhibitions, etc.), and this labeling, when applied to conservation, helps to organize interviews, which are usually shared as raw data, and therefore difficult to consult. Furthermore, data evaluation must go beyond the artist’s interview, including also the analysis of past treatments/re-installations, and the assessment and prioritization of the values that are involved in the final decision. From this perspective, we suggest that the final documentation should be submitted to a peer review process, where two different conservators make the final decision regarding data evaluation and further conservation options.

Final Remarks

The process of documenting Francisco Trope’s artworks was undoubtedly complicated by their intended variability and their inter-artwork relationships. His artworks are a “machine of relations,”¹¹ and one of the biggest challenges regarding their preservation is therefore to establish and preserve the connections among them. It was possible to understand that Trope’s works, like other installations, range in degrees of variability. The conservator’s role cannot be detached from those degrees of variability. Conservators inevitably act as managers of change every time they act upon the artwork. Every act of documenting and every decision made are acts of change, managed by the conservator. In some works, such as Francisco Trope’s *Grotto*, however, the conservator acts not only as a manager of change, but also as a co-producer, by directly and intentionally influencing the work’s characteristics. For example, it is the conservator or curator who chooses the grotto’s projection, and that inevitably, and creatively, changes the work. While the definition of degrees of variability could imply a quantitative approach to this issue, any attempt to quantify the conservator’s limits within a specific context would certainly fail. The documentation and preservation of any complex and variable installation cannot be devoid of subjectivity, and as such, cannot be measured or represented in quantitative units. On the other hand, those acts of co-creation have repercussions in the projects’ trajectories, as well as the trajectories of every single work. The different representations of *Grotto*, past and future, will influence *The Assembly of Euclid* project in unpredictable ways. Each trajectory, from every autonomous work, is dependent of other trajectories. Similarly, changes in the path of a single work may cause alterations to other paths, as in the case of *Sentry*, *Body*, and *Snail*. Instead of discussing the trajectory of each project, it is probably best to consider them as “networks of trajectories”, where each work’s biography is intertwined with the paths of other artworks belonging to the same project. Under this theoretical framework, as a final phase for their documentation, artworks under the same project should be re-installed (or reinterpreted) in the same context. That would provide invaluable data regarding the artworks’ inter-relationships, and the way they are perceived by audiences. Moreover, an online platform for Trope’s *oeuvre*, where institutions and individuals could share data regarding the different exhibitions and variations of his works, could help define their networks of trajectories. Through this process it would be possible to interrelate different data, from different sources, and ultimately to optimize the decision-making process regarding the preservation of Trope’s works.

Examples similar to Trope’s artworks blossom throughout the art world today. Performance artworks, which go beyond the variability exhibited by Trope’s works,

and sometimes explore indexical relationships with other artworks, are an example of this growing reality.

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NOTES

- ¹ Project funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia — PTDC/EAT-MUS/114438/2009.
- ² Francisco Tropa, personal communication with Andreia Nogueira, Hélia Marçal, and Rita Macedo, June 8, 2012, at the artist’s atelier.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Francisco Tropa, personal communication with Andreia Nogueira, Hélia Marçal and Rita Macedo, March 3, 2012, at the artist’s atelier.
- ⁶ This exhibition was held at Cordoaria Nacional, in Lisbon
- ⁷ This exhibition was held at Galeria Quadrado Azul, in Oporto
- ⁸ This exhibition was held at Culturgest, in Oporto
- ⁹ Francisco Tropa, personal communication with Andreia Nogueira, Hélia Marçal, and Rita Macedo, June 8, 2012, at the artist’s atelier.
- ¹⁰ According to Beerkens *et al* (ed, 2012), a theme interview is a type of interview that focuses on a specific group of artworks from the same artist. The main “advantage of this approach is the exchange of knowledge and data about several comparable artworks” (Beerkens *et al* 2012, 21).
- ¹¹ Francisco Tropa, personal communication with Andreia Nogueira, Hélia Marçal, and Rita Macedo, June 8, 2012, at the artist’s atelier.



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