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THE FRANKFURT MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST AND A PRIVATE ARCHIV: REGISTRATION SYSTEMS FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

In June 1991, after a construction and installation phase of four years, the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst opened its doors to the public.¹ The visitors accepted the museum in a manner that motivated us all greatly; we finally had time for other things which had been waiting in the wings. These included the development and compilation of a new registration system.

When Jean-Christophe Ammann took over the museum's collection, in October 1987, it consisted of a mere 162 inventory items and was thus easy to keep a check on. But when the museum opened, the number had already increased to 866. Today, the collection comprises 5000 items. A cornerstone of the collection of contemporary art was laid between 1980 and 82 when the City of Frankfurt acquired 81 major works from the collection of the industrialist Karl Ströher, who died in 1977. The Ströher Archiv was donated by his heirs to the Museum für Moderne Kunst.² In the past, the index was not compiled in keeping with museum practice. The extensive documentation is presently being worked on by Dr Rolf Lauter, and the information gleaned from it will be included in the Index to the Collection.

Initially, the museum used a conventional card catalogue system for its collection, together with photocopies, a photo archive and countless files with information. The major problem with the old index was that key data such as titles, year, sizes, techniques and materials were often kept on different pieces of paper and in different formats. You can easily imagine the difficulties, lost time and misunderstandings to which this can lead. We therefore urgently needed to standardise this information.

In search of an electronic record system

In order to devise a new index of the items in the collection we first assembled a team of art historians and conservators. This team met weekly to discuss the various needs, the design and the scope of the inventory. Later, the group was expanded to include colleagues from the secretariat, the administration, the library, and the text and catalogue editors. We soon realised that a new collection index would have to contain a wide range of information, drawn from all the museum's departments. As a consequence, we opted for electronic data management (EDP).

The City of Frankfurt was going to decide on a joint EDP system for all the Frankfurt museums, so we assumed that we could use a filecard system like the old one for the new index until the decision was made. But then the city ran out of money and we were left to our own devices. The only advantage, for us, was that we were now able to choose and develop a software and hardware system tailored to our particular needs. At this point, we had several incompatible systems: our address management system was handled by a time-worn IBM sponsored computer, the editors of the index had a Macintosh and there were privately-owned Macintoshes in the PR Department and conservators' workshop.

In September 1993, I was travelling to Aarau in Switzerland accompanying works on loan to the Aargau Kunsthhaus. During a coffee break in the administration wing of the building, I watched a member of the museum staff filling in entry masks at a PC. I inquired what program she was using. She informed me that it was part of a graduate project carried out at the Restoration Department of the Bern College of Art:³ in a practical course at the Aargau Kunsthhaus, a database had been developed by Simon Dutoit using FileMaker Pro for Windows 3.1 (running on an IBM-compatible PC under MS DOS/Windows). On my return, I told our team about it. We invited Simon Dutoit to come to Frankfurt and present his program at the Museum für Moderne Kunst. He did so and was also so kind as to leave us, free of charge, a Mac-compatible copy of what was then the unfinished program – and remarked humorously that at least he could not be held responsible for possible bugs.

This system corresponded in many ways to what we had in mind. It formed a strong starting point for our own database. For the new index of works in the museum's collection, we decided to

use FileMaker Pro data software as developed by CLARIS: we had been given a favorable impression while using it earlier on to develop smaller programs such as the address files in the PR Department and a file of various materials for the Conservation Department.

An integrated computer network

Meanwhile, we are working with the new relational FileMaker Pro 3.0 version. The hardware platform consists of 15 Macintosh PCs, one of which houses the relational database and the server. This server runs the network by means of cables that had already been installed in all of the rooms, up to the joiner's workshop, during the museum's construction. We chose Apple Macintosh computers because the system is so user-friendly, even for colleagues who tend to shy away from PCs. To date, all the financial resources for purchasing the software and hardware have been supplied by donations from the Friends of the Museum für Moderne Kunst and other donors.

The program as we run it today is made up of 46 entry masks for recording and managing data relating to loans, PR, the library, the artists' file, publications, the photo archive, and the documentation of preservation and conservation. These entry masks can all be called up and accessed via a main menu. The input of data into the masks is only possible after entering the password for the respective department.

In order to use the system's entry masks, various data items on the art work are needed – maker, title, year, size, technique and material, origin, price, et cetera. These data also have to be entered in an Inventory Ledger, the document per se; this is a regulation set by the municipal authorities and which they monitor carefully. The information is supplied by the Conservation Department and forwarded to the editors of the index, who enter it in the Inventory Ledger. Then, completed with an inventory number, they put it into the database. All further entries or changes of data are made via the inventory number.

Different approaches to data gathering

As a first step, however, precise data have to be compiled and checked with regard to size, techniques and materials of each work. The compilation of such data varies with each different goal. Independently of the Museum für Moderne Kunst, I have been assembling an archive on techniques and materials of contemporary artists for many years. In 1968, when I started work as an art conservator at the Wiesbaden Museum, I was confronted with large gaps in this information. Because pin-pointing techniques and materials was fundamental to my work, I devised various questionnaires on painting, sculpture and objects, drawings and prints, as well as on art as part of buildings, and sent these to the artists from German-speaking countries. The questionnaires were completed by hundreds of artists and published in facsimile in 1979 as a book, Volume I of the *Archiv für Techniken und Arbeitsmaterialien zeitgenössischer Künstler*. I undertook this work in my free time and at my own expense; the costs of publishing were covered by a Wiesbaden art collector. The book went out of print in a relatively short space of time. Although the interest among conservators was limited, the Archiv attracted many artists, interested laymen, collectors, technical staff in related fields, art teachers and art historians. In 1996, it came out as a reprint.

Meanwhile, I have been collecting information for a second volume – although I was unable to pursue the matter intensively once I became involved in setting up the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst. For some years now, my wife Elisabeth Bushart and I have continued to build up the archive. Her experience, gained from working with collections of contemporary art, is a meaningful supplement to the substance of this work. We run the archive in our free time and have mainly financed it from our private means. We have also received outside financial support from an art collector and, most recently, from the Cultural Foundation of the State of Hessen. The latter funding enables us to expand our range of PC instruments.

Unlike the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst, where the approach to gathering data on artists refers to individual works in the collection, our archive endeavours to compile information on the entire oeuvre of an artist. We have opted to confine ourselves to a small number of artists when recording information on techniques and materials, but we wish to record the full range of their artistic activity. The artists in question all occupy a special position as regards their respective artis-

tic approach and the choice of techniques and materials used. They include sculptors and 3D artists, painters, photographers, video and installation artists, making use of materials and media such as wood, paper, paint, milk, rice, wax, plaster, stone, metal, plastics, photos, slides, videos and computers.

Interviewing the artists

We have been personally acquainted with the artists represented in our archive for many years. Mutual trust is the main prerequisite for fruitful cooperation. For many artists, conservators seem to be critics when it comes to technical issues; this can prompt them to refrain from being involved. Artists also sometimes fear they are providing information that their fellow artists will seize upon for their own use, and it is at times difficult to put such doubts to rest.

We develop the sets of questions on the basis of our daily work. In cooperation with the artists, the data records on their works are prepared drawing on existing catalogues and art archives, and supplemented with questions. These records are sent to the respective artists, who change them if necessary. The way they reply differs from case to case. There are artists who prefer the form of an interview, others want to have plenty of time to think about things and therefore prefer to reply in writing. In each case, it is a very involved process.

The artists with whom we are in contact are in great demand in the art world, and sometimes it is difficult for us to fight our way to the top of their list of priorities. At the outset, some artists remain at a distance, while others welcome us with open arms. It can generally be said that artists today are more open-minded towards issues of conservation and restoration. There are various possible reasons: contact with conservators can be invaluable for their work, they may have had difficulties with the materials and techniques used, or they are familiar with the irritating problems of damage occurring during transportation and exhibitions, problems with museums and collectors, and so on. Moreover, the artist's role as a producer within consumer society has in itself changed. Artists now face many more questions on the durability of their work and they are expected to provide answers.

The interviews with artists and the information they provide are being brought out by the Ferdinand Enke publishing house, which has already handled the reprint of Volume 1. We have elected to present the interviews in a book in the form of Volume 2, because this will appeal to a much broader group of interested parties. The importance of this group for opinion forming and increasing the awareness of the specific problems of preserving and restoring modern art should not be underestimated.

The Archiv's data system

In our archive, we have to constantly expand and update the information. To manage this, we have developed a program running under FileMaker Pro 3.0. A data record is set up for each art work or group of works the artist has produced. The record can be accessed via several masks.

This is the general design:

1. The main entry mask, entitled Artist and work.

This first of all highlights basic information on the genre – painting, drawings/prints, photos, sculpture/3D object/reliefs, objects and installations. The following data are entered in additional fields:

- Artist, title, the respective group of works (wherever applicable), year, measurements.
- Number of parts.
- Edition, publishers, location, collection.
- Published data on the work, with references (catalogue etc.).
- A media field for illustrations.
- Information on techniques and materials.
- A field for remarks.
- A field for questions on materials and techniques, products and firms, and finally substantive questions.

- Vertical scroll bars are used for information the artist has provided on materials and techniques, products and firms, as well as for the answers to any substantive questions.
2. A mask for damaged pictures.
 3. A mask for listing illustrations of the works in question; these data appear in a window with a vertical scroll bar in the main mask.
 4. A mask to input film and video documentation.
 5. A mask listing photographic documentation, with a pop-up field for the class of photograph (e.g. artist at work, studio scenes, transport situation etc.).
 6. A mask covering literature: in a pop-up field, a list of books and essays relating to the theme and the art work in question is provided. This includes references to specific preservation and exhibition issues, information from manufacturers on the materials used and, above all, statements by the artist and/or his assistants as well as quotations by friends or conservators.

The museum's data system

In the Museum für Moderne Kunst, the layout for the entry masks and the necessary scripts for the hardcopy index were prepared by a free-lance staff member, Dr Mario Kramer. Today, he still manages the Index to the Collection; the art historian Anna Fasold is in charge of the FileMaker program. On behalf of the Conservation Department and assisted by a student freelancing for us, I have compiled the necessary mask layouts for the documentation of paintings.⁴ The layout is that of our current documentation forms, like a typewriter page.⁵ A full-page sized screen is really comfortable for working on compiling masks and for everyday work.⁶

We then started to register the paintings. Because of time constraints, I was unable to handle this task on my own; we therefore accepted the help offered by lecturers in a specialist class for art conservation and restoration at the Bern College of Art. Until today, the input of data on paintings has been done under my supervision by two graduate students at the College, each with a six-months scholarship, and then processed further by a graduate of the Hamburg Restorers' Seminar on a freelance contract.⁷ The data compiled by the students were first entered in status protocols and subsequently, if in an altered form, into the masks.

One thing was crucial for the success of our work: the contact and cooperation between conservators and index editors. We now have one mask each for the pictorial medium, the reverse side, the ground, the layers of paint, the varnish, the frame and photographic data; a mask for information on the artist and commentary or an appraisal of the works; other masks deal with data on the art work's general condition, recommended treatments, restrictions for exhibitions, special storage conditions, and loan restrictions.

As stated above, the program contains a total of 46 entry masks. Besides the masks for paintings, there are those for objects/pictorial objects, sculptures/three-dimensional works/reliefs and printed graphic art/drawings/photographs. We have repeatedly changed and optimized the original mask version in the course of our work. Presently, we are developing masks for the area of installations as well as for film and video.

To date, information on conservational and restorational measures are still entered in the field Measures for pictorial medium; special masks for this are currently being designed. The data conversion from the present masks into future masks will be quite straightforward using FileMaker.

The upper section of the masks feature fields for basic information on the work and its inventory number. These are automatically called up from the artists' list when the user is in Find mode.

Beneath this section there is a series of pop-up lists, behind which we have positioned Value Lists with the various technical terms for materials, techniques and tools with reference to, for instance, the pictorial medium, layer of paint or varnish. These Values can be inserted individually by a click of the mouse. Next to them there are standard fields, to be completed manually for numbers and numerical values.

The use of pop-up fields within the documentation masks facilitates the input of data into the fields. More importantly, it leads to a consistent use of descriptive terms. The lists contain standar-

dising concepts in order to define a work – for instance, for a material used in a pictorial medium one can choose hardboard, plywood, cotton duck, paper on linen and so on. There are also descriptors of the condition of the pictorial medium, such as 'good' or 'bad'. The status protocol for the object/pictorial object provides a terminology list with generic terms such as 'combine painting', 'collage', 'mobiles', 'ready-made' or 'rotorrelief'.⁸

Under each block of pop-up fields there are standard fields into which, if necessary, further data can be fed as free text. Where necessary, the masks contain a field into which drawings can be entered using the paint-box kit provided in the program. Although it would have been possible to incorporate an integrated picture database into the index masks, we decided not to do so. Our PCs have different speeds, and given the small transfer capacity in our network it would take too long for the pictures to assemble and appear on the screen. This would hinder us too much in our work. We therefore chose to create a picture database using Cumulus, a pictorial database program. The pictures are scanned in along with their inventory number. In the near future it will be possible to call them up in the masks at the press of a key.

Pros and cons

It was clear from the start that we would have to devote a great deal of time to this type of index. With regard to decisions on the technical equipment we have always been able to rely on the advice of a two-man company as our main partner. To date, the company has helped us on all technical issues and problems including the installation of the network. Both men work as developers for the FileMaker program produced by the software house CLARIS.⁹

Apart from the fact that we ourselves lack the time to follow up on the ideas, concepts and information collected, we also lack the funds for additional personnel and better hardware. This has delayed improvements to the program. But I hope that our experience will help those facing similar problems in systematically registering works of art. To conclude, I shall state the pros and cons of FileMaker and similar database programs:

- Purchase costs are low.
- The manual is laid out clearly, written in an easy-to-understand manner, and meaningfully rounded up by the integrated FileMaker Pro help function.
- The program offers great potential for putting one's own ideas into practice to fulfill individual needs and the masks can be laid out in a wide variety of ways.
- Changes to the masks can be handled by those who maintain the database, without the assistance of the software manufacturer.
- The program is able to cope with the range of data needed to fulfill the requirements of an independent art conservator or an institution such as the Museum für Moderne Kunst.

The disadvantages of the program are that it does not do the work for you.

1 The Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main was founded in 1981. Construction started in June 1987 and the building was completed in December 1989. The official opening was on 6 June 1991. See Museum für Moderne Kunst (ed.), *Publications on the Topping-Out Ceremony on July 13, 1988*, No. 1, Frankfurt/Main 1988; and Museum für Moderne Kunst (ed.), *2nd Information Brochure on the Architecture and Collection*, Frankfurt/Main 1989.

2 Jean-Christophe Ammann and Christmut Präger, *Schriften zur Sammlung des Museums für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main*, Museum für Moderne Kunst und Sammlung Ströher, Frankfurt/Main 1991.

3 See graduate thesis by Simon Dutoit, *Fachterminologische Probleme des Restaurators bei der Dokumentarischen Erfassung von Staffeleigemälden mit EDV*, Restoration Department of the Bern College of Art, 1993.

4 Anette Bauer produced the requisite scripts for the program and undertook the necessary clerical work.

5 The documentation forms for the paintings were largely designed with those used by the Tate Gallery in mind. The translations from English were provided by Karin Weber, art conservator.

6 When compiling our documentation masks, we used an Apple Macintosh Portrait full-page display supported by an Apple Macintosh DuoDock with PowerBook Duo 230.

7 Namely Monika Henkel, Sonja Schmid and Michael Bottländer.

8 See the exhibition catalogue *Objekte und Bildobjekte – Terminologie zu Bildobjekten der Modernen Kunst* (pages not numbered), Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1969; and Erich Gantzert-Castrillo (ed.), *Archiv für Techniken und Arbeitsmaterialien zeitgenössischer Künstler* (with supplement), Wiesbaden 1979, p. 55, as well as the reprint under the same title, Stuttgart 1996.

9 The OPTION company, based in Frankfurt/Main and run by the brothers Frank and Oliver Wudtke.

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