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DOING ARTWORKS.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE ACQUISITION AND
CONSERVATION OF *NO GHOST JUST A SHELL*

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On challenges and changes in the conservation of contemporary art

In the summer of 1997 I came to a shocking discovery. It was during an internship at the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht Netherlands, that I found out that several of the original components of the installation *La natura è l'arte del numero* (1976) by the Italian Arte Povera artist Mario Merz (1925-2003) had been replaced over the years. Okay, I understood that the organic and ephemeral materials such as the vegetables, the fruit and the wooden branches were not authentic anymore. I also accepted the fact that the broken neon numbers had been replaced by ones that functioned. The surprising showdown concerned the clay tablets: the fingerprints in the clay – in which I recognised the hand of the artist himself – turned out not to be from Mario Merz. The grand master himself had not moulded the clay, but one of the museum workers had made the exhibited clay tablets as they had been missing when the work was shipped to the Bonnefantenmuseum. My belief in the authenticity and ‘aura’ of the artwork had vanished on the spot. The museum story turned out to be an illusion, only existing for the sake of naive visitors like me.

Although amazed at first, over the years I have learnt that the interference with *La natura è l'arte del numero* was far less radical or even

unique than I thought it to be at the time. Despite the fact that the artwork's physical history is not often a topic in museum display or art historical readings, *La natura è l'arte del numero* is only one of the many contemporary artworks which has undergone some form of material change – even after it entered a museum collection. Due to the use of ephemeral material or their conceptual, instable, variable or processual character, many contemporary artworks alter in appearance and require continuous intervention by the museum to enable display, thereby challenging the notion of art as a ‘fixed’ material object. For such artworks traditional conservation strategies and theory become problematic as the traditional storage and ‘freeze frame’ paradigm is not always adequate. Unlike the commonly accepted hands-off approach of conservation of more traditional art forms, these works require continuous intervention by the museum to enable display (Depocas 2003; Wharton 2005; Irvin 2006; Laurenson 2006).

Such contemporary art practices ask for a more pro-active approach and urge curators and conservators to reflect on their role in the life of the artwork. Rather than being ‘passive custodians’, those responsible for contemporary art collections are now considered to be an interpreter, mediator or even a (co-)producer. In today's conservation theory and practice it is also well recognized that the roles in contemporary art conservation are currently undergoing some major transformations.¹ The conservation community finds itself confronted with complex challenges and is in search of a reconceptualisation of its ethical codes and related practices.² Especially, the concept of ‘change’ is in need of reframing. Because, as Laurenson (2006) argues: ‘Within this [the traditional VvS] framework, change is understood with reference to the state of the object, and change that is irreversible and undesirable is defined as damage or loss.’³ Moreover, as the aim of restoration is traditionally defined in terms of repair or a repetition of the original state of the artwork, restoration and conservation *activities* are not included in its result; the ‘doing’ is placed between brackets. In other words, due to the persistent quest in conservation for the original, what it *produces* has hardly been questioned (Pültau 2000).

The central goal of this article then is to explore an alternative way of understanding collection management and conservation in which issues of *change*, *intervention* and *production* are acknowledged, instead of being bracketed or even erased. Based on empirical research, the article attempts to distinguish different phases of the collecting and conservation process, and to take a closer look at the roles of the various actants involved in these processes. By reframing contemporary art collection management and conservation in terms of productions and interventions (instead of the more common hands-off or minimalist intervention approach of traditional conservation ethics) I suggest that not only the artist or the completed artwork should be studied, but that the museum practices in which the artwork is *done* should also become a part of the inquiries.⁴

To this end informed by an actor-network approach, I will explore the trajectory (Latour and Lowe) of an art project that fiercely undermines the traditional notion of the art work as a single, finite, autonomous product of an individual artist: *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a seminal art project initiated by French based artists Philippe Parreno (b. 1964) and Pierre Huyghe (b. 1962) and collected by the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.⁵ While most art historical and critical writings on *No Ghost Just a Shell* only consider the initial emergence of the project and neglect the formative role of the acquisition and conservation process, this article concentrates on what happens when it enters a museum collection, thereby adding to existing interpretations of the project.⁶ Three different phases will be distinguished: (1) the acquisition: the transition from artist to museum; (2) the transition within the museum from display to permanent collection; from the curator in charge of temporary exhibitions to the curator in charge of the collection; and (3) the appearance of another *No Ghost Just a Shell*. In each of these phases, as we shall see, the project undergoes transformations and is conceptualised differently.

By opening the black box and focusing on a variety of actants, complexity and changeability are no longer bracketed but become the focus of attention. Instead of referring to *No Ghost Just a Shell* as a fixed, autonomous art project, I will approach it – in analogy with Latour’s vocabulary – as a ‘collective’ (Latour 1999a). Tracing the actors will show

the appearance of a collective and allows to address the mixture of materials, humans, spaces, spatial arrangements, procedures and protocols. Moreover, we will see that when the configuration of actants (both human and non-human) change, the project’s identity does so too. At each of these moments in time, the acquisition – unlike a fixed and stable object – shifts to some degree, never being the same as before.⁷

Although *No Ghost Just a Shell* is already a complex, hybrid, and – admittedly – at some moments extreme case study, it can be regarded as paradigmatic to much contemporary art today as many of the challenges here are (in different and often perhaps more modest ways) typical of contemporary art practices. However, before entering the museum, I will first briefly discuss the beginnings of *No Ghost Just a Shell* and how it all started.

The Emergence of No Ghost Just a Shell

The history of *No Ghost Just a Shell* goes back to 1999 when Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe decided to buy the copyrights of a virtual character, modeled the image in 3-D, gave it a name (Annlee), a voice, and started of with making two short real-time animation films on the character. Between 1999 and 2002 they shared it with other artists, inviting them to create their own artworks using ‘Annlee’ as a point of departure. Over a period of three years works were shown singly or with other Annlee-works at approximately 25 different locations mainly in Europe but also in Japan and the USA. There were paintings (by Barande and Phillips), videos (by for instance: Gillick, Gonzalez-Foerster, Curlet, and Ohanian), toys for Annlee (Bullloch and Wagener), wallpaper (M/M Paris), music (Vaney), and even a coffin for Annlee by Joe Scanlan made out of IKEA cupboard supplies.

On the initiation of the director of the Kunsthalle Zurich, in 2002 these works featuring Annlee were first shown together in the exhibition titled ‘No Ghost Just a Shell’ (the title of the exhibition is derived from Masamune Shirow’s classic Manga film: *Ghost in the Shell*) at the

Kunsthalle in Zurich (CH), later travelling to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (U.S.A.), and the Institute of Visual Culture in Cambridge (UK).⁸ At each of these occasions the selection of artworks varied and its presentation was adjusted to the specific exhibition sites.



Image 1: *Do It Yourself Dead on Arrival (AnnLee)* (2002) by Joe Scanlan. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Exhibition view: Van Abbemuseum 2003. Photography: Peter Cox, Eindhoven.

In retrospect, the event of displaying all Annlee artworks together in a single show can be considered as a key moment in the trajectory of the project for two reasons: (1) Because it enabled thinking in terms of an exhibition at one location; and (2) because during the preparations of the Zurich show the initiators of the project decided that it was time to end the project. Parreno and Huyghe commenced to transfer the copyrights of Annlee to her imaginary character in order to prevent other artists

from using the sign. The wish was ‘to protect Annlee’ and ‘to ensure that the image of Annlee will never appear beyond the existing representations.’⁹ In effect, an intellectual property lawyer was hired to draw up a contract transferring the rights back to Annlee.

On December 4, 2002 at 9:30 pm, the vanishing of Annlee was celebrated by means of a staged fireworks display during the inaugural night of Art Basel Miami Beach. Huyghe: ‘This will be her last manifestation as her silhouette sparkles and dissipates in a series of fireworks over the skies of Miami Beach as she is finally disappearing from the kingdom of representation.’¹⁰ Clearly, the artists envisioned putting Annlee to an end. By that time, however, the Van Abbemuseum had already committed to purchase *No Ghost Just a Shell* at the event of the opening of the new museum building. The artists, according to the museum curator who was responsible for the exhibition and acquisition, were surprised: ‘They were very enthusiastic and said that they could never have dreamed that somebody would come up with the idea to try and acquire all these artworks’, says the curator.¹¹ In the publication accompanying the acquisition of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, Pierre Huyghe states: ‘The implications of this acquisition have to be invented. There’s this book, plus a museum that may take the name of Annlee. Through acquisition the Van Abbemuseum will be contractually bound to the project’ (Huyghe in: Huyghe and Parreno 2003: 23).

Acquiring *No Ghost Just a Shell*: Transference from Artists to Museum

This tentative reconstruction of the beginning of *No Ghost Just a Shell* before it entered the museum collection shows that the project was not realized within a fixed conceptual framework or according to a predetermined plan. The emergence of *No Ghost Just a Shell* is influenced by many actants, and shaped by coincidences, chances, negotiations, and compromises. In interviews the artists say the development of the project should not be regarded as a linear process, but rather as a kind of rhizome that grows organically, appearing and disappearing according to the

connections that it enables to make. The emergence of the project, in other words, is already envisioned by the artists as a network structure.¹²

Around 2002, with the acquisition of the project by the Van Abbemuseum, and despite the unifying, identifying act of the disappearance of 'Annlee' in fireworks, yet again other, temporary, relations are established. Rather than stabilizing the art project and freezing it into a single form, the acquisition created new coalitions and mutations. Right from the start, *No Ghost Just a Shell* was depicted as a 'special purchase' and a breakthrough in collection activities, for instead of an individual object, an entire exhibition was acquired. It will come as no surprise that this acquisition involved much more than merely purchasing and transporting several objects. It took the director, the curator and other staff members at least one year to sort out all legal aspects of the project and to decide, together with the artists, which works should and could still be acquired. It is telling that the museum was closed for renovation when the idea arose to purchase *No Ghost Just a Shell*. In fact, the closed museum can also be considered as an actant because the unusual situation of the Van Abbemuseum being closed allowed for the possibility of the purchase. In this situation the museum's organisation could now be adapted to the amount of work that was needed to redefine the project. The acquisition did not only imply challenging practicalities, but also conceptual demands: what first had been a temporary travelling exhibition consisting of individual artworks now had to be re-conceptualised as a museum acquisition. Rather than preparing for temporary exhibitions, the curator could devote all his time to the preparations of the purchase and presentation of *No Ghost Just a Shell* at the opening exhibition of the new museum building.¹³

As stated above, the first step to take was negotiating what it was exactly the museum would acquire. For the organising artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno it was important that the acquisition would be accompanied with a publication for which they invited several authors to reflect on Annlee in a similar fashion as they had earlier invited artists to work with the figure of Annlee. Through the acquisition by the Van Abbemuseum, *No Ghost Just a Shell* was extended with the production of a book which was then also considered part of the art project.

The acquisition however also led to the production of another new artwork. The coming into being of this particular work deserves particular attention as it illustrates the unpredictable character of the process as well as the need for collaboration and intervention on the part of the museum.

A New Artwork: *Travelling Pod* (2003)

Besides the production of the book, the curator was in charge of acquiring each individual art work. Parreno and Huyghe acted as intermediaries between the museum and all individual artists who had made works figuring Annlee.¹⁴ Of over 30 works, each had to be purchased under separate cover from the relevant artist or gallery because there was no specially developed economic system within which the Annlee-works had been produced at the time. Rather, all works were created within the conventional economic characteristics of art production, and limited editions circulated in the art market. As a result, not all art works were still available. It soon became clear for instance that the first Annlee video works by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, which were considered essential components of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, but produced in a limited edition, were sold out and no longer available on the art market. The artists solved this problem of the limited edition by designing a new artwork: a robot entitled *Travelling Pod* (2003) that incorporated the two reproduced video works. This way, by incorporating the videos in a new artwork and giving the work a different title, the artists could work around the problem of the sold out authorized video works. For the production of this robot, the help of engineers of Philips Applied Technology Research team was requested and Philips engineers became enrolled in the artistic project. The robot, with an exterior based on a design by Parreno, was custom-made for the Van Abbemuseum but its workings derived from the autonomous soccer-playing robots designed for the Philips Robocup Team. The *Travelling Pod* was programmed in such a way that it could project the video works of the Annlee project on the gallery walls while moving on its own behalf according to the scale of the exhibition room and the patterns of the floor carpet that was specially

designed for this purpose. In summary: the museum's goal was to purchase *No Ghost Just a Shell*, but what this consisted of had yet to be decided. In order to do so the museum needed to produce a robot or find another way of solving the problem of the limited edition of the two video-works. Thus in the transformation of the temporal exhibition to a



Image 2: *Travelling Pod* (2003) by Pierre Huyghe and Phillipe Parreno. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Exhibition view: Van Abbemuseum 2003. *Travelling Pod* projecting Pierre Huyghe's video *Two Minutes Out of Time* (2000). Photography: Peter Cox, Eindhoven.

museum acquisition, the character and components of the art project shifted: a new artwork was added and the idea of diffused time and space (as mentioned above: before coming together, the Annlee artworks were shown separately from each other, appearing in exhibitions all over the world, like 'a sign scattered in space') now became manifested in the moving robot projecting the various video works randomly in the exhibition space.

Securing relations

At this point, the curator of temporary exhibitions has mobilised the artists, the entire project, the robot and the Philips Company in order to realize the acquisition of the exhibition. Besides actants such as the artists, the museum space, and the curator of temporary displays, less obvious actants such as a closed museum building and sold out video works have also been distinguished. All these take part in the shaping of *No Ghost Just a Shell* – and vice versa.

There is yet another actant in the story of the acquisition of the exhibition: the administration of the museum. As said, although each work was acquired individually from the artist or the relevant gallery, the curator felt strongly about securing the sign and its relations by purchasing an *exhibition* instead of singular artworks. His main interest went out to the thinking of Parreno and Huyghe in terms of an exhibition and how *No Ghost Just a Shell* allows us to reflect on the notion of exhibitions and collecting. This, according to the curator, is one of the crucial aspects of the Annlee project:

'It is not a group exhibition in the traditional sense of the word. All these artworks are in fact one thing. It is kind of an exhibition conceptualised as an object, if something like that would exist. But of course it is not one object. As a museum we have acquired a whole exhibition and that, according to the artists, was never done before.'¹⁵

For the curator of temporary exhibitions it was important to registrar the exhibition in the museum's documentation system as if it was one acquisition, one work. Registration of the purchase under one single inventory number would however cause several administrative problems. The curator collection, generally responsible for all museum acquisitions, was confronted with a problem due to the limitations of the documentation system and the rules of insurance companies. This is because when individual artworks are not registered in the museum database system they are administratively no longer visible and simply do not exist in terms of collection management.¹⁶

The Museum System (TMS) used by the museum can thus be understood as an actant in the acquisition process in the sense that some of its properties (every single acquisition requires its own entry) are delegated to the curator collections. In order for the project to be accounted as an acquisition, it needs to be fragmented into single objects. However, if in the museum's documentation system no reference is made to the project as a whole, the relations between the objects could easily be overseen by future museum staff members. This was considered an unwanted possible effect of the documentation strategy. The curator of temporary exhibitions therefore stresses the conceptual necessity of considering the exhibition as a whole rather than a collection of individual artworks: '[...] I was interested in the idea that an *exhibition* would become part of a collection; thus questioning the object-centred approach of museums. At first, I didn't succeed as the exhibition was not registered under one collection number. Instead all individual objects received their own inventory number just like regular practice.'¹⁷

During one of my last visits to the museum, in 2008, the registrar explained that the museum has currently solved this administrative problem by creating 'work sets in which the relations between the Annlee works are registered', but the exhibition as a whole does not have an inventory number and is not registered as an exhibition. In the paper-based collection archive of the museum each individual art work is filed according to the name of the artist or artists and the individual files all contain a copy of the acquisition proposal document that mentions that this particular work belongs to the *No Ghost Just a Shell* project.

'What exactly have we acquired?'

In the shift from temporary exhibition display to *collection* exhibition display, the museum responsibility for *No Ghost Just a Shell* shifted from the *curator of temporary exhibitions* to the *curator collection*: the latter is in charge of the care of collection management and conservation issues. Under the care of the curator collection, the initial question 'What exactly are we acquiring?' posed during the acquisition phase, now shifted to: 'What exactly have we acquired?'¹⁸ Faced by the conservation challenges related to the indeterminate character of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, the curator collection took up the opportunity of the European research project 'Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art' to investigate the parameters of *No Ghost Just a Shell*.¹⁹ In this context the curator collection arranged to present the project anew. This second presentation of *No Ghost Just a Shell* at the Van Abbemuseum was accompanied by a museum brochure reflecting the kinds of questions the curator collection was dealing with:

'What does it mean for a museum to purchase such a project? What are the possibilities for showing the work and what is the impact of such possibilities on the significance of the project itself? How do the individual works relate to the whole and to the context in which they are shown? What happens when the components scatter in time and space? What happens when the works take up other spaces, like the virtual one of the Internet?' (Van Abbemuseum museum brochure 2005)

Interestingly, rather than mimicking the previous display of *No Ghost Just a Shell* at the Van Abbemuseum, and freezing the exhibition into a single format, the curator collection suggested a more experimental approach. 'Acting in the spirit of Annlee's founding fathers,' she suggested a presentation in different 'installments'. Referring to the genesis of the project, the curator collection envisioned an exhibition that developed in time, challenging the limits of the Van Abbemuseum, and possibly even scattering outside the context of the museum building once more.²⁰ Eventually, three different instalments were realised in which in total 20 of the Annlee works were set up, a purple carpet connecting the different displays.

However, in the unfolding and execution of her plans, the curator collection found herself confronted with several questions and challenges in the display and future conservation of *No Ghost Just a Shell* which were not anticipated so much at the time of acquisition. One of the main problems, according to the curator collection, was that the initiating artists seemed less approachable for consultation and authorization of her plans. Although the artists actively participated in the first phase of accommodating Annlee to the museum, it turned out to be very difficult to mobilize them for this next phase. Perhaps, the curator collection suggests, they are too much occupied with new works and at this time do not seem to regard Annlee as their priority or even responsibility. At any event, the curator collection regrets that they have been less engaged. According to the current director the involvement of the artists is at this point indispensable; they are, in other words, regarded as crucial for the coalition:

‘With a work like *No Ghost Just a Shell* the context is in a sense everything. And then: who can control the context? Nobody can, so that condition is always a negotiation. The question is: how do you manage to make the negotiation effective? The artists, the persons who supposedly have the sovereign right to make such decisions, have to be engaged in that negotiation. Otherwise, where are we?’²¹

The story of Annlee here seems to illustrate Martha Buskirk’s (2003) observation that the artist’s ongoing presence and decision-making have become more important for a work of art as the physical object has become increasingly unstable as a marker of what constitutes the work of art. Although Parreno and Huyghe seem to have (currently) withdrawn themselves from continuous active involvement in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, questions about management of this project remain and new challenges for the museum emerge. One of the more practical problems, for example, concerns the robot *Travelling Pod* which is considered a crucial component by the curator collections. Due to the closed software programmed by Philips, the museum is limited in its exhibition possibilities as the robot only functions in the space it was originally designed for. Questions of ownership versus free distribution are also continuously raised as, despite the contract, new Annlee works pop-up

outside of the initial *No Ghost Just a Shell* context, such as Mercio Cantor’s *I’m still alive* (2006). The Van Abbemuseum is now pondering whether they should acquire this work as well.

Another No Ghost Just a Shell

Meanwhile, around 2004 another *No Ghost Just a Shell* came into view when private collectors Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz announced to acquire *No Ghost Just a Shell* for their collection in Miami. Instead of one, there were now two *No Ghost Just a Shell* projects. This of course had implications for the conceptualization of the Van Abbe’s *No Ghost Just a Shell*. For the Van Abbemuseum it, at least, triggered thinking about whether what they acquired was a unique work of art – and whether that matters.²² On March 16, 2007 the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), North Miami and Tate Modern announced that *No Ghost Just a Shell* had been donated to them. In the press release it reads: ‘MOCA and Tate now jointly hold the only complete version outside the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, due to the extraordinary generosity and foresight of Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz.’²³

By coincidence, only a week later, I presented a paper on the Van Abbemuseum’s *No Ghost Just a Shell* at a symposium at Tate Modern in London suggesting a conceptualisation of the conservation approach informed by ANT.²⁴ After the talk, the exhibition curator and Head of International Modern and Contemporary Collections at Tate commented on their recent acquisition:

‘It has come to us as a very generous gift from a Miami based collector and I had assumed that it was going to be a rather straightforward acquisition that would arrive, and we would condition check it, make lots of inventories. But as you were talking, I realized that although it is an editioned work – and when you purchase an editioned work you normally get a kind of a copy of something that already exists – it seems to me that probably what we are getting is a number of object items that exist in a particular formulation at the Van Abbemuseum, another particular

formulation in the store in Miami, and once they get to the Tate and we begin talking with Huyghe and Parreno it will probably evolve into something completely different. I think that is quite interesting because it raises all kinds of questions of what constitutes the unique work, and what is an edition. I am not sure whether we have the language or the systems to cope with that yet.²⁵

Of particular interest here is the acknowledgement that the Van Abbe's *No Ghost Just a Shell* is different than the private collector's *No Ghost Just a Shell*, as will be the Tate's/MOCA's *No Ghost Just a Shell*. Indeed, through the ownership of the Van Abbemuseum and its particular practices and interventions their *No Ghost* has become what it is today. The trajectory of the other *No Ghost Just a Shell* is and will be very different however. It is this specific trajectory that makes them unique. Currently, three museums now have the ownership of *No Ghost Just a Shell*. What this means and how the projects evolve from here is as much a matter of the future rather than – as the traditional notion of conservation assumes – solely of the past.

Conclusion

Much of the discourse on the activities of collecting and conservation is underpinned by the assumption that an artwork has an a-priori identity and that it is the museums' task to keep the artwork's physical and conceptual identity as stable as possible. In this traditional conception of conservation the identity of an artwork that has entered the museum is understood as an entity that can be known, captured and truthfully represented. Building on insights from STS scholars, this paper has argued that this assumption resembles a realist or essentialist line of thought that does not fully allow for an inquiry into the work that is done to constitute this identity. By means of describing the trajectory of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, I have tried to show that collecting and conservation as a practice, by aiming to acquire and preserve the identity of the work, also constitutes the identity of the artwork.

As we have seen, in the practices of the Van Abbemuseum alternative notions of the art object are already explored. In fact, the purchase of *No Ghost Just a Shell* may even be regarded as a means to explore the possibilities and limitations of the traditional museum. *No Ghost Just a Shell* in many ways challenged existing strategies to an extreme extent, yet it can be argued that (less extreme) art works such as time-based art and installation art pose similar challenges. The article argues that these challenges and the way they are dealt with co-determine the nature of such artworks and should therefore be taken into account. As a way to consider the constitutive role of the museum in the artwork's trajectory, I have employed an ANT informed approach. Rather than focusing on stability and freeze frame, this approach allowed me to see and reflect on these changes, and on the different degrees of production and intervention. Moreover, it allowed me to distinguish actants which are usually overlooked: the museum building, its administration procedures, the curator, director, conservator and technicians all take part in the process of changing coalitions and the coming into being of museum artworks. The concept of 'change', in conservation theory traditionally only associated with loss, has been reframed in terms of potentiality and productivity.

Admittedly, such a focus on the 'doing' of artworks does not immediately result in answers for conservation problems. Rather, it helps to conceptualize collecting activities as a process in which different phases can be distinguished. Another advantage of describing practices in this way is that different practices, rather than solely their outcomes, can be compared and evaluated. This article has attempted to show in which ways an ANT-approach helps to unravel such processes and in doing so may allow for a reconceptualisation of conservation practice and the roles of actants in this process. From this perspective, further research on STS literature reflecting on the 'acting with' or interventionist approach of ethnographical researchers would be useful for the conservation field in creating a critical discourse to evaluate such interventions and for providing a framework to understand and reflect on this new engagement of the museum professional in conservation practices.

The awareness that the museum is not a neutral conduit is certainly not new, yet it can be argued that the museum's practices are generally neglected in art historical and aesthetic readings. In the case of variable, unstable or in other ways changeable contemporary artworks, however, these issues need to be addressed, since the works cannot be separated from these practices. Because of the dynamic and indeterminate character of these artworks, no clear line can be drawn between the artwork and museum practice as they shape each other. The existing division between practices behind the scenes and the artwork in the public space of the museum becomes unclear. In these cases it is particularly interesting and relevant to explore what happens behind the scenes as back-stage and front-stage become increasingly intertwined.

From this point of view, it does not seem possible to keep the working practices backstage as the actions and decisions can have far reaching consequences for the appearance of the artwork. Thus, if one intends to study contemporary artworks, one needs also to address the contexts in which the artworks are enacted and address the museum practices in which these works are 'done'. Studying the working practices of museums in such a way may also shed new light on the relationships in the museum and might provide more insight into how conservators and curators become part of the process of making at different moments and different intensities.

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¹ The use of the terms curator, conservator, and restorer is far from unambiguous. In different countries and individual museums they mean different things. In this article the term 'curator' is used to refer to those in charge of temporary exhibitions as opposed to 'curator collection' or 'conservator' by which I refer to those responsible of the permanent collection (i.e collection presentations and conservation). I employ Muñoz Viñas' (2005: 15) use of the term conservation as the sum of conservation activities including preservation (the activity that avoids alterations of something over time) and restoration.

² For further reading on the challenges of collecting and conserving contemporary art, see for example Heuman (ed) 1995; Hummelen and Sillé (eds.) 1999; Altshuler (ed) 2005; Richmond and Bracker (eds.) forthcoming 2009. This article clearly builds on the large body of work already done in this area. On the changing practice of the conservator and the need for more reflexivity in conservation practice, see for example: Hummelen and Scholte 2004; Hill Stoner 2005; Macedo 2006; Clavir 1998, 2002; Laurenson 2006.

³ Laurenson's primary focus is on time-based media work, but she immediately acknowledges that 'the fact that these works are installations has perhaps a greater impact on the development of a conceptual framework for their conservation than the fact that they involve time-based media.' (2006)

⁴ My approach responds to the recent call for ethnographic studies of behind-the-scenes activities knowledge production in museum practices (Macdonald 2001, 2002; Yaneva 2003ab). In general, museum practices - and especially conservation practices - receive little attention from art historians and aesthetics which tend to focus on the display of the 'original artwork' and not on its continued life within the museum walls or on the work that is done to ensure a work's perpetuation.

⁵ I conduct an actor network theory (ANT) informed approach by reconstructing the actors in the acquisition and conservation process of *No Ghost Just a Shell*. By taking into account the actions of non-humans as well as the human, I pursue one of the significant strands of ANT, here mainly associated with Bruno Latour's writings. For a more elaborate discussion on actor network theory (and its limitations) see for example Latour 1987, 1999b, 2005. Sociologists of art such as Albená Yaneva (2003ab), Macdonald 2001, 2002 (on the science museum), and Pascal Gielen (2003) have engaged in actor network theory in order to study the dynamics and negotiation processes of art production in search for alternatives to the dominant art sociological readings of the last decades. Hoogsteyns (2008) has explored the usefulness of 'actor network theory' for the discipline of material cultural studies and explains the increased attention for this perspective in material cultural studies by pointing towards its renewed interest in materiality.

⁶ For interpretations of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, see for example the 110 issue of the art journal *October* (2004) featuring an extensive article by Hall Foster as well as an interview with Pierre Huyghe by George Baker, and articles by Claire Bishop and Tom

MacDonough on 'relational aesthetics', an aesthetic theory developed by French philosopher, art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud (1998). Huyghe, in an interview about *No Ghost Just a Shell*, refers to Nicolas Bourriaud as being 'instrumental to setting up this group of artists'. The artist continues: 'In a certain way, Nicolas's book was like the production of a new scenario, in the manner I discuss this in my own practice. His book and his words provided a linkage between various artists and people' (Huyghe quoted in Huyghe and Parreno 2003: 100-110). Relational aesthetics attempts to characterize the artistic practices of the mid- and late nineties including work by Huyghe and Parreno as well as artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick.

⁷ The research was done in the context of my Ph.D. thesis *Doing Artworks. An Ethnographic Research into the Presentation and Conservation of Installation Artworks* (forthcoming): an ethnographic study of the working practices of contemporary art museums and their approach to presenting and conserving installation artworks. The materials presented here are produced during several fieldtrips to the Van Abbemuseum. Observations, documentation research and interviews with museum staff were performed between January 2005 and May 2008. Although I believe it makes no sense to conceal the identity of the museum and the artists, in the tradition of anthropological research, citations from interviews are made anonymous because I here consider the recognition of specific professional roles more important than the identity of the persons interviewed. Citations from interviews that were originally in Dutch have been translated into English. My gratitude goes out to the staff of the Van Abbemuseum in allowing me to be a participant observer of their practices and follow the trajectories of this project. Special thanks go out to Christiane Berndes and Margo van Wiel. Also, I would like to thank my colleagues at Maastricht University and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this text.

⁸ Kunsthalle Zurich, 24 August 2002 – 27 October 2002; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (December 14, 2002 – March 16, 2003); Institute of Visual Art, Cambridge (December 14, 2002 – March 16, 2003).

⁹ See: and Huyghe and Parreno 2003: 25 and press release SF MOMA (September 13, 2002) at http://www.sfmoma.org/documents/press_releases/NoGhostJustaShellpdf.pdf, last accessed December 2008.

¹⁰ <http://www.transmag.org/annlee/index.htm>, accessed 28th May 2007. This major event heralded a lot of publicity and exposure for Annlee, including the cover and centrefold of *Artforum's* January 2003 issue.

¹¹ Interview with the then-curator of temporary exhibitions of the Van Abbemuseum, 13.01.2005.

¹² Here it is important to note that although *No Ghost Just a Shell* can be described in terms of a network structure, this is not the same as employing Latour's collective as an analytical tool, which is the objective of the article.

¹³ Within the organisation structure of the Van Abbemuseum the latter normally belongs to the tasks of the curator collection, in charge of collection management and collection presentations, but in this case it made more sense to allocate the aspects involved with the acquisition to the curator simply because the domains of exhibition production and purchase were so much intertwined. *No Ghost Just a Shell* was presented as a gift from the Foundation Promoters Van Abbemuseum for the occasion of the opening of the new museum building on January 19, 2003. The opening exhibition ABOUT WE / OVER WIJ ran until August 2003.

¹⁴ The acquisition consisted of a heterogeneous set of art works (video's, paintings, furniture, toys, a coffin etc etc). Participating artists: Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, M/M Paris (Mathias Augustyniak and Michael Amzalag), Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Joe Scanlan, François Curlet, Pierre Joseph & Mehdi Belhaj-Kacem, Richard Phillips, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Anna Lena Vaney, Melik Ohanian, Lili Fleury, Henri Barande, Angela Bulloch & Imke Wagener.

¹⁵ Interview with the then-curator of temporary exhibitions of the Van Abbemuseum, 13.01.2005.

¹⁶ Interview with the curator collection Van Abbemuseum, 21.10. 2005.

¹⁷ Interview with the then-curator of temporary exhibition of the Van Abbemuseum, 13.01.2005.

¹⁸ It is telling that since the acquisition of *No Ghost Just a Shell* by the Van Abbemuseum, the curator collection, museum registrar as well as several interns and other researchers (including myself) have spent considerable time collecting, ordering, re-ordering, producing and analysing all kinds of documentation. In its relatively short existence *No Ghost Just a Shell* has already produced a vast amount of research documents, articles, interviews, discussions and traces on the internet, theses and other kinds of documentation activities. Capturing Annlee seems a challenging but captivating enterprise indeed. Particularly noteworthy in this context is the thesis of Kristel Van Audenaeren (2005) in which she describes all individual artworks and links the production of *No Ghost Just a Shell* to network theories. Anne Mink (2007), in the form of an internship report, adds new information to the project. Both documents conclude with addressing questions about future display and collection management.

¹⁹ Inside Installations, supported by the Culture 2000 program of the European Union, was initiated and coordinated by Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN, Amsterdam), and co-organised by Tate, London; Restaurierungszentrum der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent; Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK, The Netherlands); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. Project website: www.inside-installations.org. The website also contains the curator collection's report on the research performed on *No Ghost Just a Shell*.

²⁰ Interview curator collection Van Abbemuseum, 21.10.2005. See also http://www.inside-installations.org/artworks/detail.php?r_id=378&ct=research, last accessed March 2009.

²¹ Interview with artistic director Van Abbemuseum 27.03.2007.

²² Interview with the then-curator of the Van Abbemuseum, 13.01.2005.

²³ Press release MOCA, North Miami. www.mocanomi.org/moca-tate.html, last accessed May 2007. In a recent interview, published in the December 2008 issue of *Art + Auction*, Rosa de la Cruz mentions *No Ghost Just a Shell* as one of the works which she donated to a museum because it was difficult for her to show: 'It involved video, sound, a hard drive and bringing the people who do Disney World animations to my house. It was a

language I didn't understand.' <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/29405/conversation-with-rosa-de-la-cruz/>, last accessed December 2008.

²⁴ The paper was presented at 'Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles? Artists' Installations and the Museum', 22 March, 2007, Tate Modern, London. Web cast available through: http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/shifting_practice_shifting_roles/default.jsp, last accessed December 2008.

²⁵ Transcribed from the symposium's web cast, see note 24.