The Importance of Artist’s Voice: Developing a treatment plan for Dora Kovačević’s sculpture *The Wall (Zid)*

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1. Introduction

The paper discusses the topic of artist interview, explaining how the preparatory research should be conducted and the interview questions set up. It also demonstrates how the information obtained in the interview could be used.

2. The Treatment of Modern and Contemporary Artworks: Challenges

Not only that in works of modern and contemporary art the relationship between material and meaning is often ambiguous,¹ but also the materials and techniques used in their production can have meanings of their own. Changes of the artwork’s material properties, that take place due to ageing or deterioration processes, can alter this meaning. What is even more important for us here is that conservation-restoration interventions that alter the material identity of the artwork can also affect its meaning.

Therefore, the decision-making in the treatment of such artwork is very complex. It includes collection of general information about the work, documentation, condition survey, research into the artwork's meaning, recognition of discrepancies between the artwork's physical condition and its meaning, treatment proposals (from preventive conservation to extensive restoration), weighing treatment options (the key question here being: How will the proposed treatment influence/alter the meaning of the artwork?) and, finally, selection and implementation of the proposed treatments (keeping in mind that the final choice is always a compromise).

Through the interview with the artist, one can gather comprehensive information about the materials and techniques employed in the creation of the artwork, the artwork's meaning (including the meaning of the materials and techniques used in its production) and the discrepancies between its meaning and physical condition.

3. Artist Interview

Artist interview falls into the category of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Unlike quantitative interviews, which elicit yes and no answers, qualitative interviews are based on open (i.e. problem) questions that require description and explanation. In a semi-structured interview, questions are asked based on a plan, but the interviewee can answer them freely, in his or her own way.

There are four basic types of artist interviews: oeuvre interview (interview focused on artist's entire oeuvre), theme interview (interview based on one group of works or works from a specific period), collection interview (works from a single collection are discussed) and case interview (focused on one specific work). Each of these interviews requires different preparation and a somewhat different list of questions.²

Before the interview, all available documentation about the artwork(s) should be collected and analysed. The more the interviewer knows about the artist and his work(s), the more detailed and precise his or her questions will be. Best results are achieved when two experts from two different fields conduct the interview, preferably a conservator-restorer and a curator or conservator – art historian. The discussed artwork should be displayed at the interview location. Ideally, the interview should be recorded with a camera.

Artist interview has four phases. In the opening phase, interviewer(s) present the participants and explain the interview's purpose and aims. In the core part, artist discusses his or her work(s): where he/she draws inspiration from, how the artwork has been produces, what the idea behind it is... The interviewer(s) deepen the interview with questions regarding artwork's display, reception, ageing and deterioration... In the final phase, conservation-restoration issues are discussed. Interviewers summarize the interview and test the artist's statements for consistency.

The aim of the interview is to gain in-depth insight into the artist's creative process, materials and techniques he or she uses, idea behind his or her artwork; to determine at what point, in artist's opinion, conservation-restoration treatment becomes indispensable and what the intended results of such a treatment should be. It is important to stress that the artist's opinions concerning the conservation-

² This chapter, with the exception of the first paragraph, is based on: BEERKENS, Lydia et al., The Artist Interview : For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art : Guidelines and Practice, Heyningen : Jap Sam Books, 2012.
restoration of his/her artwork do not oblige the conservator-restorer to follow them blindly. In the end, it is the conservator-restorer, curator (art historian), owner and other stakeholders who determine the scope and course of conservation-restoration works.

4. The Interview with the Sculptor and Graphic Artist Dora Kovačević

1.1. Sisak Sculpture Park Conservation Project

In 2012 the Conservation-Restoration Department of the Arts Academy in Split joined the project that aimed to protect and conserve the outdoor sculptures created within the framework of the Sisak Steelworks Artists’ Colony. The Sisak Sculpture Park is comprised of 38 outdoor sculptures created from 1971 to 1990. The sculptures have been erected in the outer spaces of the (former) Sisak Steelworks and in the green spaces of the workers’ settlement Caprag (Figure 1). Following the initiative of the Sisak Conservation Department of the Ministry of Culture, Striegl Municipal Gallery and Sisak Municipal Museum, the Sculpture Park was entered in the Heritage Register of the Republic of Croatia in 2012, and a collaboration with the Arts Academy, Split, was established.

The Conservation-Restoration Department of the Arts Academy, Split, has organized four conservation-restoration workshops so far. Among many other activities, the workshops participants have conducted a systematic research into the history of the Sisak Steelworks Artists’ Colony. (The research is still in progress.) The interview with Dora Kovačević, described in this chapter, concerns her sculpture The Wall in the Sisak Sculpture Park (Figure 2). The interview is also about the history of the Sisak Steelworks Artists’ Colony.

The interview with Dora Kovačević was conducted by Tina Tomšić and Sagita Mirjam Sunara.

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Figure 1. Sisak Sculpture Park on the Google map: red markers indicate the location of the sculptures (Neven Peko and Sagita Mirjam Sunara, 2015; https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=zLHxXG5CcDml.kdbLr19N6150)

Figure 2. Dora Kovačević, *The Wall*, 1985, painted steel (photo: Neven Peko, 2015)
1.2. Sisak Steelworks Artists’ Colony and Dora Kovačević’s sculpture *The Wall*

Between 1971 and 1990 around 200 academically trained artists from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia participated in the Sisak Steelworks Artists’ Colony, creating around 700 paintings, sculptures and photographs. At the close of each Colony, an exhibition of artworks produced during its course was mounted. A printed catalogue accompanied the exhibition.4

Sculptors worked at the Sisak Steelworks, using the materials that the factory produced and the factory’s manpower. They created both smaller, "gallery" scale sculptures, and larger sculptures intended for the outdoors. Due to years of neglect, the outdoor sculptures have severely decayed. Some of them have been stolen and sold as scrap metal.

Dora Kovačević participated in the 15th Colony, held in June 1985. Kovačević produced the sculpture entitled *The Wall*.5 The sculpture was installed on the ground level of the building that houses the Caprag Library. The date of the instalment is unknown.

The sculpture leans against the building wall. The surface is scratched and covered with graffiti. The black paint has faded and discoloured. The bottom part of the sculpture is partially corroded. Corrosion is also visible on the "back" side of the sculpture. The aim of the interview with Dora Kovačević was to collect data that would help conservators-restorers devise a treatment plan for *The Wall* and a proposal for the sculpture’s future display. The other important aim was to gain insight into how the Colony functioned and to collect data about other sculptures produced in the same year (1985), which have not survived.

1.3. Glimpse into the data collected by interview

*The Wall* was developed from a small-scale model made of papier-mâché with wire or mesh wire armature. Steelworkers assisted the artist in the making of the sculpture. The sculpture was made of thick steel sheets/plates. Dora Kovačević does not remember how the sketch was enlarged; she presumes that the shapes were drawn on the steel plates with chalk, and that the workers cut them out with a welding machine. Before the elements that form the sculpture were welded, the steel plate that forms the central, convexly rounded part of the sculpture had been bent (Figure 3). Finally, the artist made perforations in the steel plates, and the edges of the perforations were grinded. The sculpture was painted after she left the Colony. The sculpture was not supposed to be painted, because the artist had envisioned it in metal (steel). She, however, wanted a clear protective coating to be applied, her only

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5 Sculptor and graphic artist Dora Kovačević (b. 1951) studied in Zagreb and Paris. She creates graphic works, drawing, sculptures and tapestries.
request being that it not be glossy. A glossy varnish, said Kovačević, would "dematerialize" the steel.

Kovačević explained that the theme of her sculpture is a wall, a fortress. With the rectangular cut in the central part, the sculpture reminds of a loophole. At the time *The Wall* was created, the artist was fascinated with graphic art: the contrast between black and white, filled and unfilled space, positive and negative... Her sculptures are drawings in space.

She knew that *The Wall* would be displayed in the outdoors. She does not remember if anyone consulted her about the exact location for the sculpture. She does however remember that after the colony exhibition, which took place in September 1985 in the Caprag Library, *The Wall* was displayed in the vicinity of the exhibition venue. She says that the sculpture should be displayed in the way that it is viewed from all sides, because it was envisioned as a wall with two sides: front and recto, positive and negative form. The sculpture could be displayed against a vertical surface, as well, but not in the way in which it is displayed now. In any case, the sculpture should be slightly lifted off the ground, in order to prevent its contact with water.

Kovačević thinks that her sculpture is generally in good condition. In her opinion, corrosion, graffiti and scratches do not alter the work's meaning, and do not disturb the visual appearance of the sculpture significantly. She even finds the paint applied to the sculpture without her consent acceptable, but only because it has faded so much that it now resembles the material the artist originally worked with – raw steel. The sculpture, she says, does not require an extensive conservation-restoration treatment. She would keep the paint, but remove the corrosion.
would also raise the sculpture from the ground, to isolate it from water that might collect at its base.

1.4. Conservation-restoration treatment proposal

Based on the data collected through preparatory research and the artist interview, a conservation-restoration treatment proposal was made:

Graffiti should be removed. Corroded surfaces should be cleaned, and an anti-corrosion coating (matt) should be applied. Missing paint should not be retouched, because the damages to the paint layer do not impair the legibility of the artwork. The sculpture should be moved to another location, and displayed in such a way that it can be viewed from all sides. The sculpture should be placed on a low plinth, from which it should be separated using metal dowels, in order to prevent the corrosion of the bottom of the sculpture.

Before making the final decision about the treatment, the conservators-restorers, art historians (curators and conservators – art historians) should decide whether there is a discrepancy between the physical state of Dora Kovačević's sculpture and its meaning. Such a discussion would provide sound base for the planning of the conservation-restoration works.

1.5. Learning from experience: some interview errors

The video recorded and transcripted interview with Dora Kovačević is now a part of the conservation-restoration documentation of the Sisak Sculpture Park project. During the transcription of the interview, a few errors in how the interview was conducted were noted.

Firstly, it needs to be said that the interview with Kovačević was divided into two parts. The first part took place in the Caprag Library, while the second part of the interview was held in front of the sculpture. In the first part, the participants were seated at a table: the artist in the middle, and the two interviewers at her sides (Figure 4). When answering the questions, the artist was not sure who she should look at, so she kept turning from one interviewer to the other, which disturbed everyone's concentration.

Another problem was that the artist was shown several photographs that were to be used as a visual reminder before the interview started. Since she was already familiar with the photographs, during the interview she started talking about them before the interviewers raised that particular question, which caused a change in the sequence of the questions. Since the interviewers prepared a lot of photographs, and the artist was not very specific in describing their content, it was difficult to deduct from the recording which photograph she was talking about.

Only one interviewer had the printed list of questions during the interview, which again resulted in a change in the interview plan. On one or to occasions, the
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Interviewers suggested the artists how to respond to their question. Some questions were not well formulated, so that the artist did not provide the answer the interviewers wanted to get.

![Figure 4. Tina Tomšić, Dora Kovačević and Sagita Mirjam Sunara (video still / video recording: Ivan Ivan Cindrić, Video-studio "Vrbanus", Sisak)](image)

5. Conclusion

Artist interview is a method for collecting rich and detailed information about artwork. The collected information provides better understanding of the object, and enables the owner, curator and/or conservator-restorer to conserve it and present it properly.

Although curators and conservators-restorers are not obliged to follow the artist's proposal for the treatment of his or her artwork, in the case of Dora Kovačević's sculpture The Wall, the artist's views on the desired outcomes of the conservation-restoration treatment have served as the basis for the conservation-restoration team's approach to the display and conservation of the sculpture.