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Conservation according to need: Understanding conservation practices in private collections

Conservation is one of the five obligatory tasks of a museum in order to be eligible to be called a museum. But why should a private collection bother about conservation if, to all appearances, it is not obliged to do so? Nevertheless conservation can be/ is present in private collections; in order for it to be there, it needs to fulfil a function or a specific purpose. What the function is and what conservation practices may look like depends on the specific characteristics and the needs of a private collection. These in turn are determined by the environment of the collection, specifically, amongst other things, by the art world and art market. Conservation practices in private contemporary art collections can also differ widely due to the various manifestations of contemporary art. Based on interviews with conservators and observations, this presentation aims to shed light on conservation practices in private contemporary art collections, and what causes these practices to take the shape they have. The analysis is informed by the theoretical approach of Howard Becker, who understands art as the product of collective work rather than a purely individual product. This approach allows to show how conservation practices are established, not as the result of the actions of a single group of professionals, the conservators, but rather as originating in the interplay of individuals from various professional groups such as artists, art handlers, collection managers, registrars, appraisers, shippers, art dealers and the private collectors themselves.