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Barriers and facilitators: applying infrastructure theory to the conservation of complex contemporary artworks

This paper draws on theories from infrastructure studies, developed in the field of Science, Technology and Society Studies (STS), to further understandings of some of the challenges museums face in their attempts to safeguard works of performance art that employ particularly complex production processes.

A consideration of infrastructure is helpful in relation to the conservation of performance art since it allows us to understand the systems and structures and embedded practices currently in place for the collection, registration and stewardship of artworks in the museum and how in many ways these traditional structures are called into question by the arrival of more variable or ephemeral pieces.

It is particularly beneficial in relation to the study of performance-based works for its ability to highlight the situations in which certain people or things (or artworks in this case) are not served by a particular infrastructure. As Star and Bowker (2002) argue, the usefulness of infrastructure for different populations is always relative. Informed by fieldwork in various museums, this paper will argue that much of the infrastructure that has been established for, and works so well for, object-like artworks in the museum acts more as a barrier than a facilitator in the context of performance works.