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The quest of perpetuation of contemporary artworks as a demand for a new professional role

In many instances, conservation literature discusses the challenge that museums face with contemporary art¹ as largely a challenge of documentation; while, at the same time, the conservator is identified as the museum professional with the responsibility to play a key part in the documentation process, adjusting her/his role accordingly. This paper argues that an adjustment of documentation methodologies and of the conservator's role are insufficient to eradicate the issues that museums are confronted with when working with contemporary art. More specifically, it claims that behind the well-recognised and undisputed documentation challenge lies a critical problem regarding the specificity of the research required for the perpetuation of contemporary artworks. The complex, idiosyncratic and contextual materiality of contemporary artworks requires from collecting institutions a particular paradigm of artwork research, which has as its primary subject the individual artwork's identity and ontology. Such research relates mainly to the field of humanities and is required to adopt its core methods and theoretical frameworks from philosophy. Accordingly, the required paradigm of research, it will be argued, calls for a new paradigm of artwork's conservation researcher, to work alongside conservators and curators for the purposes of collecting, presenting and conserving contemporary artworks.

¹ The term "contemporary art" is often used in the literature to refer to a chronological category, while, at other instances, it is used interchangeably with the term "modern art". It is important to clarify that this paper adopts the argument of sociologist Natalie Heinich, using the term not as a chronological categorisation but as a term signifying a particular paradigm of art, one which is distinct from both traditional and modern art.