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Material History

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This tool has been developed for with the intent of mapping the material histories of the performance-based artworks in Tate's collection. When mapping the material history of artworks, we hope to identify the material conditions of their various activations. This includes understanding, for example, what equipment and materials were used and for what, who has been involved in curating, producing, directing, or performing the work, where the activations have taken place, and the interactions between the social context and the materiality of the work. In other words, writing a material history consists of understanding how artworks evolve, how and why they change, and how those changes are traces of decision-making processes that are both material and social. The mapping material histories of performance-based works, therefore, is intrinsically related to producing a technical history of these artworks. To use the words of the scholar Erma Hermens:

Researching the material history of an artefact is the objective of what is presently called technical art history, a relatively young field of research involving art historians, conservators and scientists but also reaching out to other disciplines such as economic and social history, anthropology and aesthetics. The interdisciplinary character of technical art history combines a variety of expertise into a holistic research approach that concerns the creative process from idea to artwork, at any one time and place, and from any culture.<sup>1</sup>

In investigating the material histories of artworks, the study of the technique can be made through observation (including through technical means), archival research, testimonies and processes of re-enactment (or, so-called re-methods).<sup>2</sup> The use of these various methods – oftentimes in combination – can provide conservators and art historians with a glimpse of the past and an understanding of how things were made. In the case of performance artworks, observation can entail a direct observation of the activation of a performance. Archival research and testimonies usually encompass the gathering and critical discussion of documentation of past events as well as (where possible) interviews with artists and other relevant stakeholders. Processes of re-enactment, on the other hand, can imply either the participation of the documenter (often a conservator) in the activation of a performer or the production of the activation itself, following a set of instructions or the documentation produced prior to the event. Depending on both the institution's resources and the artwork's needs, a combination of these can be used at any given situation. All of these methods were used in the documentation of Tony Conrad's [Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain 1972](#).

Mapping the material history of artworks is an essential step in their documentation and overall care. This exercise can help determining how the artwork has evolved, and which are the dimensions that are important for its making. Some of these dimensions can be what we have

called '[constant elements](#)' while others can be contextual and just part of how the artwork was manifested at a given time. Whilst the various dimensions that contribute to the making of material histories of a given painting tend to be somewhat self-contained, the same does not happen with performance-based artworks. The nature of each performance and the ways in which it has changed since its inaugural event, will change the dimensions that need to be explored in understanding the making of a given performance artwork. The number of performers or participants in each instantiation of the artwork, for example, can be a factor that significantly changes the material history of a given performance – true in the case of *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain* or David Lamelas's [Time](#) 1970 – or otherwise be a dimension that does not directly impact upon the ways in which a given artwork can be activated – for example, in the case of [Good Feelings in Good Times](#) 2003 by Roman Ondak. The material history of each artwork is, however, one of the places where these dimensions are identified.

After the different dimensions of a performance-based artwork are identified, we create a table describing the various ways in which they were manifested differently. The x-axis of this table concerns each of the identified dimensions, while the y-axis refers to each instantiation of the work. Besides allowing for a systematisation of all gathered information, the table format also enables the identification of the gaps in the material history of a performance artworks and its instantiations, making visible possible future avenues for research. This working document will grow every time the artwork is displayed. The information gathered in the [Activation Report](#) will feed into this table, complementing our understanding of how the artwork has unfolded in a particular display with a historical perspective about how such an act of unfolding is positioned in the artwork's biography.<sup>3</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See Erma Hermens, 'Technical art history: The synergy of art, conservation and science', in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. by Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, and Kitty Zijlmans, Leiden and Boston 2012, pp.151–65.

2. See, for example, Sven Dupré, Anna Harris, Julia Kursell, Patricia Lulof, and Maartje Stols-Witlox, eds. *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Amsterdam 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctv1b0fvx7.

3. See Renée van de Vall, Hanna B. Hölling, Tatja I. Scholte, and Sanneke Stigter, 'Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation', in Janet Bridgland (ed.), *ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Meeting, Lisbon, 19–23 September 2011: Preprints*, Almada 2011. Significant changes – such as changes that seem to suggest a turning point in the artwork's biography, or that respond to changes in the context of display – will then result in changes being made to the Performance Specification <[link to Performance Specification](#)>.

## Contributors

This tool was developed by Hélia Marçal, in conversation with Louise Lawson. The tool was further explored by Louise Lawson, Lia Kramer, Acatia Finbow, Ana Ribeiro and Hélia Marçal, expanding the pool of case-studies.



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