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For the record: document and record sensibilities of art conservators in the Philippines

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In this article the authors present a study of the use of documents by a small group of art conservators in the Philippines. Documents are important for these conservators, but not just, or even primarily, for their role as memory devices. Also important are the functions they play in creating a sense of professional identity, for mediating the tensions created by a bureaucratically structured workplace and an occupation traditionally organised around notions of craftsmanship, and as creators of persuasive evidence for clients.

Keywords: art conservators; documentation; Philippines

Introduction

In this article we present a study of the use of documents by a small group of art conservators in the Philippines. Documents are important for these conservators, but not just, or even primarily, for their role as memory devices. Also important are the functions they play in creating a sense of professional identity, for mediating the tensions

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Literature review

It is good practice to begin by clarifying the object of our analysis, in this case, documents and records. Michael Buckland described information in three ways: information as thing, information as knowledge and information as process. The physical representations of 'knowledge, facts and beliefs' defined information as thing. Documents and objects, which provide such representations, are thus information as things.[1] Roberts described documents as having distinct attributes and elements that work together to produce certain effects and which reflect social relationships in an organisation.[2] Letters, annual reports and forms are examples of documents encountered in most offices.

Yet, it can be argued that documents can also be found within the category of information as process, the 'act of informing' according to Buckland.[3] For instance, objects and buildings offer traces of what has happened to them through their own documentation, further inspiring historians, architects and information scholars to produce further documents and represent them in some form. Documents often make up the basis for interactions between human actors and, in the process, provide the means to normalise beliefs and values as well as strengthen or weaken certain practices.

Documents in Buckland's typology are therefore both things and process: they are things that capture and represent an organisation's beliefs, facts and values (such as a form, an annual report, an image or a product brochure), but documents can also be mediating, shaping and informing processes.

Records refer to a specific kind of document: they are documents that provide evidence that certain activities and transactions have taken place. For instance, a library card is a document, and within the library card is a series of borrowing records for an individual user. Records are therefore closely related to documents,[4] but function as important traces of activities within organisations. What gets appraised and kept as records in an archive therefore determines what gets remembered or forgotten by society. Schwartz and Cook argued that this very function of records gives it great power over the shaping of society and the practices embedded within it.[5]

In recent years, a number of scholars have turned their attention to the nature of documentation and recordkeeping practices in the sciences and bureaucracies of modern society. Bernd Frohmann writes of the need to cultivate a 'documentary sensibility' in order to appreciate the role documents play in making 'things come into being', what he refers to as a documentary ontology that clarifies the unstable, conflict-ridden and dynamic practices that go into the creation and use of documents.[6] The mediating role of the medical record in creating the medical body is the subject of Berg and Harterink's unravelling of how records create particular geographies and histories of the body in the hospital context, arguing that a deeper understanding of records is needed to fully appreciate the switch to digital record technologies as much that is of value and of importance in the record is not immediately perceptible and may be lost in the transition.[7] Shankar, in a study of scientific recordkeeping, concludes that records need to be both useful and accountable to the individual creator and the wider community of practice of which they are a part. Recordkeeping was observed to be a creative process that works through 'multiple acts of selection, integration, synthesis, and annotation'.[8] She argues for a view of records as part of an information infrastructure and that

recordkeeping needs to be seen as internalised by members of an organisation.[9] Bazerman describes the need for a new kind of literacy when he calls for individuals in an age and society inundated with new documentary forms to have 'some understanding of the different principles by which the different kinds of information are ordered within the relevant documents'.[10] And Ciaran Trace, in a survey of earlier literature on records in law enforcement, develops a framework for understanding the creation and social use of documents that stresses the interplay between technical and social entities.[11]

Much of this literature stresses the complexity of documents and records, moving it from the taken-for-granted status it is normally assigned, with an associated image of dry and dusty paperwork, to a key place in the complex social behaviours that structure much of modern life. Documents are seen as far from lifeless products of bureaucracy to becoming part of circuits and processes that animate the most complex activities of human beings acting in social capacities.

In this sense, the literature argues that documents do not only offer information about our lives and the social institutions within our societies; they are also the very mechanisms by which social actors build relationships with their environments, institutions and, through their interactions, with each other. This pervasiveness and mediating role of documents in contemporary society highlights the importance of developing research addressing and understanding the archaeological nature and impacts of documents in diverse domains.

However, most of these studies have dealt with records in a limited number of the sciences, or in the medical and police professions. Little work has been done on records produced and used in other areas of social life. There are of course some notable exceptions. Lemieux investigates the role of recordkeeping in accounting for bank failures, arguing that routine practices as well as deliberate failures in recordkeeping contribute to financial crisis,[12] while Davies reports on a study of the role of the script as a mediating object among theatre professionals, noting how it gives rise to a distinct set of epistemic practices.[13] Richard Harper has produced an ethnography of the International Monetary Fund in which the focus is on the 'career' of the document. He argues that such a focus can shed light on the organisational work performed by the institution as well as guide the design of future 'document technologies'.[14] And Frohmann has presented an account of the role of documents in creating the notion of 'man' in the nineteenth century.[15]

Guided by the same ethnographic approach, we add to the literature by presenting a study of the use of documentation by art conservators in the Philippines. Art conservation is a small, but growing, profession that offers a distinctive contrast to the more established occupational groups that have normally been the focus of documentation studies. Furthermore, the choice of the Philippines, a country on the world's economic periphery, also provides a contrast to many documentation studies which have typically focused on the developed world.

Method

The work described in this paper is influenced by Garfinkel's concept of ethnomethodology. Garfinkel came up with the concept to analyse the ways people employ different methods to help make sense of the world they live in.[16] Ethnomethodology often provides fine details of the ways in which people in different social, professional and organisational contexts make meaning out of their activities. Closely associated with ethnomethodology is the underlying principle of social constructionism, which acknowledges that all

knowledge is culturally and socially produced. Research based on this assumption therefore needs to document and explain the ways in which social institutions and actors produce, share and use knowledge. In the context of our study, we focused on the use of documents by art conservators in the Philippines in making sense of their work, including reflections on how documents shape their activities, processes and outcomes.

Prior argued for four approaches to the study of documents: (1) the study of the content of documents, which is what most content analysis of documents entails; (2) the study of documents in shaping the 'schemes of social interaction and social organisation', focusing on documents in driving social activities; (3) the study of how documents are used by 'human actors for purposeful ends', drawing relationships between documents, and between documents and human actors; and, (4) an 'archaeological' approach, where researchers study the procedures, structures and conceptual architecture that bring about the creation of documents.[17] The fourth approach in particular has been discussed in detail in the work of Yakel, who argued for the importance of analysing the processes, activities and practices leading to document creation. Such work, she believed, would lead to shifts in the perspectives of archivists, specifically the context through which archivists view records.[18] These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and all four approaches provide the theoretical basis for our study.

At the start of our research, we recognised that there were two centres for art conservation in the Philippines. Over the course of our research, we found the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) to be more available and accessible to researchers, and was also more developed in terms of its activities and impacts on art conservation in the Philippines. It thus became a focal point of study. Thereafter, the first author approached leaders in NHCP to obtain permission to conduct interviews as well as samples of the documents used within the conservation branch of the organisation. We then approached conservators that were involved in the use of these documents. Eventually, we interviewed the majority of the conservators in the organisation (three out of four), with each interview lasting an average of 90 minutes. The conservation department also employed on-the-job trainees and assistants, but these were not interviewed. Given the level of professional expertise required, interviewees have a good command of English and the interviews were thus conducted in that language.

Transcripts from the interviews were then read and analysed. The analysis is informed by the approach clarified by Bowen[19] and involved three iterative activities: skimming (examining documents and records as a whole for their general attributes and relationships), reading (thorough examination of what is being recorded in the documents and records as well as how they are being used as clarified in the interviews) and interpretation (which involves understanding how the documents and records are being interpreted by conservators as well as reflexively examining how we are interpreting such meanings). As Bowen argued, such an analytic approach 'combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis'.[20] While content analysis is about the organisation of information gathered (both from the interviews and from our reading of the documents and records), thematic analysis focuses on recognising patterns and themes emerging from the data.

The evolution of art conservation and its development in the Philippines

Art conservation, even in the more established centres of North America and Europe, is a relatively young occupation. Generally viewed as having its origins in eighteenth-century Europe, it was accompanied by the creation of the restorer as a separate

vocation from the artist. According to Daly Hartin, as public collections grew in size, restoration of works quickly gained prominence. However, the aim of these early restorers was much different than today – instead of clearly identifying restored portions of objects, they were rewarded more by achieving the ability to mimic the artist's technique so perfectly that audiences could not detect the difference between the two.[21] Over the course of the nineteenth century, this approach to conservation was gradually modified to one more recognisable to our own period. It was also in the nineteenth century that the two great poles of conservationist thought took shape. On the one hand, Eugene Viollet-le-Duc argued that conservation could restore objects to states they had never been in before, while on the other, John Ruskin did not believe objects should be restored at all; damage and the wear of time were, for him and his followers, an integral aspect of an evolving object.[22] In the twentieth century, conservation has increasingly downplayed its restorative role to stress preservation instead with the aim to increase 'the life expectancy of either intact or damaged collections'.[23] In this endeavour, science came to play a significant role,[24] while in recent decades the term *preservative conservation* has been coined to describe the role of the conservator in helping to create the ideal conditions for the objects under their care to survive long periods of time.[25]

In the Philippines, art conservation takes place primarily in two centres: the Division of Materials Research Conservation at the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, and the National Museum of the Philippines. For this article, the focus is on the former.

The NHCP traces its roots back to 1933 when the colonial state established the Philippine Historical Research and Marker Committee. Three years later, the committee was renamed the Philippine Historical Committee (PHC) with the goal of purchasing and repairing, as well as identifying, historical antiquities in the country. In 1967 the PHC gave way to the National Historical Commission, which subsequently expanded its work to include more broadly educational work under the Department of Education and Culture. Further mergers took place in 1972, leading to the creation of the National Historical Institute, which in 2010 was renamed the National Historical Commission of the Philippines. Currently, the NHCP consists of five divisions: Materials Research Conservation, Research Publications and Heraldry, Historic Sites and Education, Historic Preservation, and Finance and Administration.

The Materials Research Conservation Division (MRCD) is charged with conducting 'scientific research and the conservation and restoration of historical relics, memorabilia, and national monuments' as well as promoting 'science and technology activities by providing consultancy services to collectors of valuable historical objects in accordance with accepted international standards'.[26] There are various standards adopted and recommended by different organisations, such as the Guidelines for the Application of Art Documentation Standards recommended by the Art Museum Image Consortium in 1999,[27] and also standards developed to address specific types of artworks, such as the Media Art Documentation by the Guggenheim Museum.[28] Most cultural institutions adapt standards to address requirements of their own collections; but in the case of the MRCD, no reference was made to specific standards nor were there documents providing knowledge of how such international standards evolved within their own walls.

The MRCD consists of a workshop, conservation lab and a small library of reference materials. It is a member of a number of international conservation bodies, including the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, and the

Institute for Conservation. As well as its conservation activities, the division engages in education work with local governments, non-governmental organisations and other groups throughout the Philippines.

For this study, staff at the MRCD were interviewed in July 2012. Follow-up questions were asked via email. The overall aim of the interviews was to elucidate the role or value of documents relevant to the conservators in their ongoing work. Key documentary forms were first identified and these provided the focal points for the interviews, with respondents asked to comment on their own, completed forms for objects they had recently worked on.

First impressions: the nature of the physical records

As objects progressed through the conservation lab, they were shadowed by particular documents.[29] At its first appearance in the lab, the object was assigned an entry number in a logbook. This number was also recorded on a separate entry form. Two copies were made of this form and one was given to the client. As well as the entry number, the entry form recorded name and address of the depositor/owner, a short, one-sentence description of the object, a set of checkboxes to indicate the broad kind of treatment proposed (for example, mechanical or chemical cleaning), a section for remarks, a list of conditions imposed by the NHCP on the acceptance of objects and, finally, places provided for the signatures of the depositor/owner and staff member receiving the object on behalf of the division.

Once the object was accepted into the lab, it was assessed, with the results recorded on an assessment form. Some of the same information found on the entry form was repeated here: name and short description of the object. But the assessment form also included more details: provenance, size and, if from a museum, accession number. After this came a section with the heading 'Material Condition', which provided checkboxes for a rudimentary assessment (good, fair, poor, rejected). There were also a few lines given for individual remarks. Checkboxes for the type of damage incurred by the object (physical/mechanical, chemical or biological) preceded an 'estimated budget requirement' and spaces for three staff signatures. The first of these was for the staff member who did the work. This was followed by the recommendation for approval by a senior conservator and final recommendation by the chief of the lab. Another number was assigned to the object at this point: a conservation record number. In some cases a drawing or photo of the object was also included.

After assessment, treatment could begin, with documentary attention passing to the conservation treatment form. Here was recorded, sequentially by date and time, the nature of the work the conservators did on the object (for example, removal of a damaged book cover or sewing book pages together). Each activity was signed by the staff member while the bottom of the form provided for signatures of the 'supervising officer' and the chief of the lab.

When the object was ready to be returned to the owner, an exit form was completed. This form included space to indicate the depositor/owner of the object, its name, a summary of the treatment provided in the form of a short paragraph, the same three conditions elaborated on the entry form and space for the signatures of the staff members releasing the object and the depositor/owner. Once again, two copies were made and one given to the depositor/owner.

While this description of the documentary process suggests a sense of formality, the overwhelming impression one gains from a study of the physical records themselves is a sense of informality. Early records are written on the backs of re-used memos and other documents. Typographical errors are lined out with pen or pencil and insertions are made simply in whatever space is above or below the sentence. Since little room was available for writing to begin with, much of it is small and difficult to read. There appears to be no standardisation in that some of the records are typed and others handwritten. Informal terms such as 'here and there' and 'stubborn stains' are used rather than more technical or specialised terminology. And pencil, rather than some more permanent medium of writing, is frequently to be found. This informality in the visible aspects of the records does not match the importance attached to them by the conservators, who claim, when asked, that the creation and maintenance of these records is an important component of their work:

> we make sure that it is all documented because you see artefacts or paintings or memorabilia are very important so it's not a joke. So we really record what we see on the item and keep these as important documents.[30]

The incongruity between the informality of much of the recordkeeping process and the importance attached to it should come as no surprise. Organisations may not always be cognisant of the impacts of keeping records in the long run, thus encouraging informality in the face of what seem other, more pressing, issues. But at a more general level, the nature of the records and documents produced by an organisation is not always easy to understand from the perspective of the outsider. Garfinkel, for example, in his work on medical recordkeeping, tells us of a 'class' of problems confronting researchers 'if [they] consult the files in order to answer questions that depart … from organizationally relevant purposes or routines'.[31] The key, of course, is to understand these 'purposes or routines', or, in other words, the context, of the recordkeeping. How do the conservators use these records? The following sections answer this question.

Providing a reference

If we ask the conservators why they collect particular pieces of information, the typical answer ascribes to the records a reference or educative function. When asked the purpose of recording the material properties of the object to be conserved, one of the informants declared that it would

> aid future restorers … if they read first they would know that abaca is very brittle when its dry so it could fall off if you would remove it without first consulting the earlier records.[32]

One of the more detailed explanations in this vein came from conservator 1:

> So this will be our reference in case something special [happens to the] painting … they bring a painting and afterwards they say, oh that's not the colour of my painting, because after restoration there is a change in the appearance, so we have to explain … this is our reference.[33]

However, when asked how frequently the art conservators access these records once the object was returned to its owner, the answer invariably was rarely. One of the conservators noted that records would be consulted if the museum or other agency was

conducting an inventory and could not find the item in its collection, but when asked if this had ever happened, the respondent, who was also the most senior member of the organisation, replied that it was not a frequent occurrence. Similarly, if there was a dispute with a depositor then the records would be consulted, but this had happened only once in the career of this conservator.

Although the staff appear to be generally aware of the potential use of records, awareness of the equally important need to ensure that records are organised in a way as to facilitate easy retrieval appears to be missing. The filing system consisted of a series of ring binders, one for entry and exit forms and the other for assessment and treatment forms. Obtaining a full set of documents for any given object was more tedious than it perhaps ought to be, especially as there was no identification number to link the separated sets of documents.

All this suggests that, despite the professed importance attached to the reference function of the records, in the day-to-day operations of the lab they are not frequently used for their ability to store information; to act as references.

But this does not mean that the records served no important purpose. As Lindsay Prior notes, documents have two basic roles: 'receptacles of content' and 'active agents'.[34] In the case of the art conservators under consideration here, we identified three specific ways in which the documents acted as agents: as a means of developing professional authority and identity, as a means of reinforcing hierarchy in organisations torn between bureaucratisation and craftsmanship as guiding occupational principles, and as a means of negotiation between clients and staff.

Records as a means of asserting professional identity and expertise

The use of records to develop and enhance professional status is not confined to conservators. Yakel, in her study of the recordkeeping practices of radiologists, argues that in order to develop their professional status, radiologists created requisition systems to show how their services were in demand and the radiological report to show their mastery of the interpretation of the images, around which payment of their services, rather than the images themselves, revolves.[35] Similarly, according to Berg and Harterink, efforts by the American College of Surgeons to enforce recordkeeping among doctors was seen as a means of marginalising 'bad' doctors and hence enhancing the overall image of the profession.[36]

As related above, conservation is a relatively new occupational category and conservators have fought hard to be recognised as a profession, with mixed success. Caroline K Keck noted in 1978 that the occupation presented 'no authoritative image … [with conservators being] society's barely acknowledged stepchildren'.[37] Writing in the 1990s, Daly Hartin noted that

> in most countries, the profession of conservation is still not well defined. Unlike law or medicine there is not yet public acknowledgment of conservation as a profession. Conservators do not require a license to practice conservation, and in most countries there is no widely accepted standard or method of accreditation for conservators.[38]

Although the situation appears to have improved since then, with conservators seen as 'form[ing] a reasonably recognisable occupation both in the United Kingdom and internationally' although '[o]ccupations such as curators, architects and archivists have traditionally occupied the role of the more senior or influential profession',[39] in the Philippines the situation of conservation as a profession remains precarious. Having

only been introduced to the country in the 1970s and 1980s, there is no school devoted to its study and the number of practitioners remains very small, while national standards for conservation work are non-existent. When asked to comment on the status of the profession in the Philippines, one respondent noted that its 'development is very very slow'.[40]

In this context, it is not surprising that recordkeeping is seen by the Philippine conservators as an important element in building the status of the profession in the country and in creating the notion of expertise that professions need in order to justify their existence. As one respondent noted in regard to his attempts to improve documentation and recordkeeping: 'if you want yourself to be respected, if you want yourself not to be questioned anymore do something that you think will help',[41] while another noted that a completed document and series of records detailing the steps the conservator took to treat a collector's object would persuade clients 'to hopefully appreciate us [because] we did something for his collection'.[42]

Status and hence an enhanced sense of professionalism was also to be found through a notion of recordkeeping as a symbol of adherence to developed world norms. One conservator was most clear on this point, noting that Philippine conservation was behind the West 'by ten years. More than ten years' but that the recordkeeping data requirements that his lab adhered to followed international standards.[43]

Finally, recordkeeping and professionalisation are also brought together through the notion held by many of the respondents that clients need to be educated about the value of conservation. Recordkeeping in this manner became implicated in creating an expert–client relationship for the conservators: 'We try not to be so very technical here so at least the layman would understand, the owner would understand, what transpired during the conservation process', one conservator revealed in a discussion of the exit form.[44] Another related that:

> this is a new field in the Philippines and you know our problem … is how to communicate in layman's terms what you are doing because you don't expect collectors and some others that they have the knowledge on the subject so we want to reach out to them.[45]

If recordkeeping was seen as helping to build a deeper degree of professionalisation within the Philippines, as evidence both of the application of expert knowledge and the adherence to international norms, and of the creation of an expert–layman division, this is not its only function. Equally important is the role of records in creating a sense of hierarchy within the organsation and balancing between the needs of an occupation that straddles between the ideals of craftsmanship and scientific bureaucracy, the subject of the next section.

Records as mediating tensions between craftsmanship and bureaucracy

The conservation department is only one small component of a larger organisation. Hence its members need to fit themselves into a wider culture that stresses hierarchy as well as standardised rules and procedures for handling cases. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the young occupation of conservation has for most of its existence operated in environments resembling more small craft shops than large hierarchical organisations.[46] In these craft shops, worker autonomy, at least for skilled labour, was likely preserved through the retention of tacit knowledge and the shared values surrounding the craft. Moving such forms of work into bureaucratic settings is fraught with

tension,[47] a tension added to by the nature of the Philippine labour market. Salaries for government bureaucrats in the Philippines tend not to be very high compared with the private sector. In fact, the Philippines as a whole is a net exporter of workers, including skilled labourers, who leave the country seeking better employment prospects overseas.[48] Art conservators do not appear immune to this pressure, with all senior conservators lamenting the difficulty of recruiting and keeping staff. These difficulties would only be augmented by a tighter regime of labour control.

Documents provide a means to, at least temporarily, overcome the tension between a bureaucracy and the greater autonomy traditionally accorded to craftsmanship and required by the peculiarity of the Philippine labour market. They do so in two ways: the collection of signatures and the provision for remarks.

Signatures were clearly important in the recordkeeping of the organisation. The forms examined varied in the completeness with which their authors filled them out, but signatures of the conservator and the chief of the lab could always be found. In fact, the trend in the evolution of these forms has been to add signatures: 'More people are responsible. Basically it's the same except more people are responsible. It's something … like continuously improving'.[49] Perhaps it is an indication of improvement, as the respondent noted, but it is certainly an increase in the bureaucratic formalities required to process an object, and, for those participating in the process, a reminder of the need to follow protocol and of the lab's hierarchy.

This notion of records as reinforcing hierarchy was explicitly referred to in the interviews on a number of occasions:

> This [assessment form] is for our own organizational profile. Somebody is assigned to assess the object. Somebody is assigned to recommend the treatment. Somebody has to approve the treatment. The hierarchy involved in the treatment process … it's a requirement that you write an official government record on that particular process.[50]

Similarly, another respondent noted that for the treatment form,

> the signature or the one working may be different … for example, for the dusting I may give it to an OJT [on-the-job trainee], then I will do the lab testing, but I have to sign my name.[51]

The same respondent explicitly drew attention to the use of signatures and the form more generally as a means of establishing clear chains of liability within the bureaucracy. Referring to the need to obtain her signature, the conservator noted: 'these are just the assistants so it means that you are responsible for this work'.[52] Other than reflecting the chain of command in specific practices, the series of signatures also provide knowledge about the relationships and interactions between the social actors involved.

But while the form acted as a reminder and reinforced the notion of hierarchy and division of labour within the bureaucracy, the more autonomous tradition of conservation was also accommodated through the design of the documentation and especially through the provision of fields for remarks or comments on each of the forms. It was clearly acknowledged by the respondents that conservation was not an exact science, that it involved much individual judgement on the part of its practitioners. When discussing how the condition of the object was to be recorded on the assessment form, for example, the interviewer pointed out to one conservator that assessment might differ

widely between individuals and asked if they had any guidelines to standardise the work. The response was that much relied on the discretion of the individual conservator.[53] Similarly, it was noted more generally that it was 'the conservation practitioner who determines the applicability of methodology and materials to be used for the object'.[54] But it was the remarks section of the forms that provided a key space for the exercise of the conservator's professional judgement and hence a release for the tension between craft and bureaucracy: 'if you have [a] particular part of this tableaux that is missing and we would want to consider either leaving it as is or rebuilding what is missing … perhaps we could put it in the remarks',[55] while another suggested that the section be used to justify a decision 'to clean or not to clean' an object.[56] In both these statements, we can see that the remarks field is meant to provide space for the conservator to justify a particular course of action when that action is not amendable to a standard set of decision-making norms.

Both these examples are noteworthy in that they represent one of the key debates in conservation circles: how far to restore an object to its original state. There is no consensus on the issue and it is a clear reminder that conservation remains to a great extent a craft that sits rather uneasily in a bureaucratic setting. In such a situation, the remarks field can mediate between the rigid rules that tend to govern bureaucracies and which the rest of the forms adhere to, and the craft nature of the occupation, which still awards a great deal of autonomy to the individual worker.

Documents and records as providing evidence or means of negotiation

For conservators there is a concern that misunderstandings with clients may occur: a painting may be temporarily changed during the process of conservation or the client may have believed that an object could be restored to its original status, whereas in fact this was not possible. Records are a means of providing evidence that the client has agreed to allow the conservator to work on their object. But this is an informed consent, the product of negotiation, or at least explanation:

> we have to [tell them] what it is, [the] treatment proposal … so we discuss it that's why we have a conforme [signature], signature of the depositors or supervisor [if government owned]. It means that he agreed on the content of this one.[57]

And, as another respondent noted:

> we should be very clear as to what is the state of the object when it comes here. What intervention has been done? So that at least both partners would be clear with … what has transpired to the object during its stay here.[58]

The evidentiary role of documents and records has been noted by scholars from early times. Suzanne Briet, one of the pioneers of document studies, defined a document in precisely this manner: 'any concrete or symbolic indexical sign, preserved or recorded towards the end of representing, or reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon'.[59]

But the invocation of an evidentiary role for these conservation documents is not meant to suggest that they are capable of capturing without mediatory affects the phenomenon under question. Dorothy Smith has demonstrated that documents enable the creation of a 'documentary reality' in 'which much if not every trace of what has gone

into the making of that account is obliterated and what remains is only the text which aims at being read as "what actually happened"'.[60] Similiarly, Trace has argued that documents or records 'represent … a persuasive version of the socially organized character of an organization's operation, regardless of what the actual order is'.[61] Documents in these accounts are meant to project a certain view of the processes they provide evidence about. They are to be read in a particular way. Similarly, the documents surrounding the objects being conserved at the NHCP are designed through their collection of signatures, descriptions of the object, sequentially listed procedures undertaken and explanatory paragraphs of these procedures to bear witness to the conservators' claim to have deployed their expert knowledge to a particular object in a certain state of decay and with the full consent of the owner. Together they are meant to persuade readers of this version of events, rather than any other. This need to persuade was clearly expressed by one respondent who noted the necessity of assuring 'not only your immediate boss [but also] your agency, you have to assure others that you are not contributing to [the problem]'.[62]

But there was a desire among the conservators to take the evidentiary and persuasive power of the documents to another level; to create records that could be inserted into the circuitry of the Philippine legal system and its own flow of documents in order to develop forms of legal liability that could protect the division. Explaining the role of the records used to record the entry and treatment of objects, one conservator explicitly brought this notion to the fore, declaring that they showed that 'the object is mutually agreed to have an intervention … I mean in the legal document you want liability to be clear … it's an agreement with the owner and the conservator'.[63] Similarly, for the exit form: 'When you sign it, it is something like when you order some goods that delivers to you sign it, that means there is no more liability on the part of the supplier'.[64]

The evidentiary and persuasive role is especially important in the Philippines, a country that does not have a standard code of conduct, let alone means of enforcing such standards. Documents provide the focal point around which clients could be briefed on what was to happen to their objects and express their consent through the creation of records. Both the documents and records created bear witness to the claim that the conservators have acted in good faith to the best of their knowledge and with the consent of the owner.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described the role of documents and records in a small organisation of art conservators in the Philippines. We have shown how documents and records are deployed to enhance the professional status of the conservators, by tying local work to international norms and providing a record of the value added by conservation work. Documents also help the conservators manage the tensions of existing within a bureaucracy that stresses hierarchy and standardisation, and the need for professional autonomy that is needed in an occupation still tied to its craft roots and existing in a particular labour market that gives many skilled workers opportunities to work outside the country. Finally, records have an evidentiary function for the conservators in case of disputes or misunderstandings. Through the discussion we have also demonstrated how art conservators make meanings of documents and records used in their practices, as well as the way power and resources are allocated in the process of creating records from documents.

It is clear that for art conservation in the Philippines, documents take on social roles in much the same way as they do for other occupational groups. However, unlike the system of documentation used by more established occupational groups, the documents described here are, as noted at the beginning of this article, of recent origin and may be said to be a work in progress. But they do have value for the conservators in advancing their interests in a resource-poor environment (the Philippines has not shared much of the economic prosperity of the rest of the southeast Asian region). It would be difficult to assign a quantitative value to the work documents have done for the conservators, but it is certain that they have played a positive part in advancing their cause. Significant progress has been made in art conservation at the NHCP. As one of the conservators told us at the end of an interview: 'If you had looked at the laboratory before you would have been disappointed … Right now we can be proud we have a good centre'.[65] Not all the credit for this can be attributed to increasing levels of documentation but, through the three functions we have enumerated here, some of it rightfully should be.

From a more global perspective, our work provides a study of documents in a professional area not previously covered in the literature, while its focus on the Philippines, a country in the economic periphery (which represents the majority of the world), provides a necessary counter-balance to studies focusing on the centre.

There are some limitations, which we hope to address in future work. As much as possible we have sought to gather data and insights from both documents and interviews with stakeholders in the organisations we studied, but this is still cross-sectional and knowledge that is not captured in documentary forms is still subject to the memories of interviewees. Some scholars may also disagree with the rationale and validity of purposive sampling, which was done in our study, but, as Patton argued, the need to select cases that can provide 'a great deal about matters of central importance to the purpose of the research'[66] is the main rationale for our sampling choice. Having diversity and breadth may not yield the kind of in-depth insights we aim to achieve. Still, we acknowledge that our findings will benefit from including different types of cases in future work.

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