Visible Issues. Insights Into the Professional Identity of the Conservator

Rita Macedo

Abstract This chapter addresses the professional identity of the contemporary art museum conservator. It departs from a general review of the literature about the professional role of the conservator to focus on how practitioners see themselves in their profession when it comes to their values, beliefs, the functions performed and perceived relationships with colleagues. I also discuss how conservators think they are seen by others (colleagues or the anonymous public). Aware of the complexity of relationships that shape the contemporary art museum, this chapter focuses specifically on the identity of conservation professionals and their reported invisibility to colleagues and the public. I argue that while some of the factors that negatively influence a conservator's self-perception come from beliefs and stereotypes formed along with the construction of professional identity, others are consolidated and perpetuated in the context of the museum, where these identities do not seem to have room for transformation or renegotiation, through professional agency.

Keywords Professional identity · Conservators · Invisibility · Museums · Contemporary art conservation

1 Introduction

Opening the website of ICOM—International Council of Museums—we can read in big letters, concerning its mission and objectives, that ICOM is an "organisation of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible."[1] Research, conservation and communication are thus the three domains of museum activity. If this chapter focuses on conservation performed in the contemporary art museum, I also argue

[1] https://icom.museum/en/about-us/missions-and-objectives. Accessed 22 Oct 2020.

R. Macedo (✉)
NOVA School of Science and Technology, Lisbon, Portugal
e-mail: ritamacedo@fct.unl.pt

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that the identified factors influencing conservators' professional identity may exceed this precise context. While the realities at play may vary across different museum contexts, and the factors influencing the professional identity of conservators may not be limited exclusively to those working in contemporary art museums, the primary aim of this chapter is exploratory.

Over the last twenty years, a vast array of studies appeared around conservation and its numerous specialisms, including conservation of contemporary art.[2] The field has grown immensely, both from within the practices involved and through the input of academic training and research. Although several publications have addressed the emergence and development of the profession, very few address the way conservators see themselves in their social-professional contexts.[3]

This chapter is grounded in a set of semi-structured interviews with conservation professionals. They were asked to respond to questions on how they see themselves as professionals, on the main challenges of being a conservator in the field of contemporary art, on the principal constraints and obstacles of the profession, and on how they feel about their jobs and perceive the status of their profession.[4] The interviewees unanimously highlighted the relative invisibility of the profession in general, and of the conservator in particular. Departing from their testimonies and the literature regarding the development of the conservation profession, I will elaborate on the contexts of what may explain this invisibility and how it influences the conservator's professional identity.

The chapter argues that identity issues are shaped by a set of factors related to identity construction aspects, embodied by stereotypes, that are linked up directly with the origins of the profession. These aspects seem mainly related to the prevalence of science and the privileging of explicit knowledge (over tacit knowledge), as well as to the lack of a more reflective approach. Other contextual aspects, associated with the functioning of the museum are also considered as contributing factors to the reported invisibility. The structure of contemporary art museums and how they are tied to hierarchies, dualities in knowledge cultures, issues of collaboration and agency seem to impact conservators' professional identity while also impeding its renegotiation.

After explaining the research methodology and clarifying professional identity and professional agency as concepts, I discuss the findings in a preliminary fashion, by sketching the main problems identified in the empirical research. The next sections provide an overview of the emergence and development of the conservation

[2] Hundreds of articles, conference papers, book chapters and books on this subject were published in the last two decades. Given the impossibility of referencing all of them, a selection of these appears in the literature of this chapter.

[3] Several studies about the role of the conservator touch on its social dimension. See D'haenens (2019), Ashley-Smith (2009, 2017, 2018), Brown (2017), Brajer (2009), Casanova (2011).

[4] This paper reflects on research carried out in the context of the *New Approaches in Contemporary Art Conservation* (*NACCA*) project on 'Contemporary Art Conservators and Curators: Roles, Collaboration, Training and Ethics'. In so doing, I mainly focus on the point of view of conservators, which featured as a minor aspect of the research performed for this project.

profession, followed by a brief description of the context of the art museum and how it evolved in theory and practice over time. The final section returns to the empirical data and expands on the identified negative factors linked to the construction of the conservation profession and the context of the art museum, where opportunities for renegotiation of this professional identity may present themselves.

2 Methodology

The empirical findings include interviews with 35 conservators across 7 countries (5 in Europe and 2 in the United States of America), representing a mix of professional museum conservators, private conservators working for museums, and former conservators that presently have managing positions.[5] In agreement with the participants, the collected information was kept confidential and anonymous. Many of the insights from these interviews were confirmed by participants in the *IIC Student & Emerging Conservator Conference*, held at the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences in September 2019. This meeting in part focused on questions like "How do we see ourselves as conservation professionals? Also, however, how are we seen by others, both by colleagues in institutions and by the general public?"[6] In a panel session titled 'Conservator Meets Institutions', the situation of the conservation profession within museums and the ways to promote the profession were discussed by a group of conservation managers who previously worked as conservators and who approached issues related to the conservator's self-identity as professional, providing important information about professional identity factors. The questions matched some of those we considered throughout the research. Even if the scope of the conference exceeded the context of contemporary art museum conservators, it helped us to corroborate the data we gathered and to consider that although contemporary art conservation in the museum raises different issues, many of the difficulties mentioned by the interviewers were felt by conservators to be present in other areas as well.

[5] The empirical research is based on interviews conducted by the author and two co-researchers supervised by the author, Maria Theodoraki, early-stage researcher in the *NACCA* project (Marie Sklodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network (2016–2019), and Rute Rebocho, master's researcher from Nova Universiade de Lisboa (2019–2020). Maria Theodoraki's research process also involved direct observation in two museums, one in Europe and one in the United States. Rute Rebocho's thesis focuses on interviews with the staff of five museums who perform conservation tasks (even though not all of them were trained as conservators) in contemporary museums/collections in Portugal. All interviews took place in-person. The interviewees were chosen to form a sample composed of conservators and curators working for or with contemporary art museums of different sizes, public and private, in Europe and the US. All the interviews revolved around functions performed, values and beliefs associated with the profession, perceived relationships with colleagues, as well as how the interviewees experienced being perceived by others and the public. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed.

[6] Questions in the announcement of the conference (IIC, 2019).

3 Professional Identity, a Complex Concept

To delineate the concept of professional identity, we have reviewed literature from the fields of sociology and psychology, most of it focusing on institutional and organizational theory. A high percentage of these studies concentrated on two groups of professionals: teachers and nurses. Most of the authors agree that the concept of professional identity is complex, mainly associated with discourse, narrative, ethical standards, structure and agency. They also stress that identity cannot be fixed because it is of a dynamic, relational and situational nature (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Enyedy et al. 2006; Cardoso et al. 2014; Eteläpelto et al. 2014).

Eteläpelto et al. sum up four theoretical frameworks of identity: humanist theories, which see the individual self as autonomous and separated from the social structures; structural theories, which emphasize the material conditions and social structures, where identities are subjugated to the structures; the notion of the "enterprising self", who maintains identity and sense of self within structures and can transform those structures; and, finally, the post-structural approach, which considers the individual determined yet "negotiating actively and relationally within social conditions" (Eteläpelto et al. 2014, p. 649). The authors also emphasize that the post-structural self is seen as "practicing agency through resisting, outmaneuvering, and avoiding strong social suggestions while creating a social position which is consistent with individual subjectivity and identity" (2014, p. 649). These four historical approaches are still subject to debate. For example, scholars will put different emphasis on the roles of context and agency, and thus on how strongly social and material conditions are seen as determining the nature of individual identities sense of self.

Kaplan & Garner, in *Developmental Psychology* (2017) underline that "professional identities are tied up not only to personal identities but also to specific and structural situations that need be analyzed case by case," while also highlighting that the concept is complex and dynamic and is related to "doing and being in practice" (Kaplan and Garner 2017, p. 2039). Recent discussions adopt the foundations of the socio-cultural approach, highlighting the importance of the social and material conditions and the workplace context, but they also hold that individuals are not neutral mediators within structures. They have a degree of agency that allows for change in their practices and work communities (Eteläpelto et al. 2014, p. 650).

In this chapter, I adopt the view of Eteläpelto et al. about personal identity as being "constituted by subjects' conceptions of themselves as professional actors," including "subjects' professional commitments, ideals, interests, beliefs and values, ethical standards, and moral obligations" (2014, p. 650). Likewise, I also stress that professional identity can be renegotiated in work contexts and aim at an understanding, in the case of the professional identity of the contemporary art museum conservator's professional identity, of where the obstacles and constraints of this renegotiation may reside.

Professional agency is a key concept because, according to researchers in the field, it is mainly through agency that professionals transform the realities of their jobs. Eteläpelto et al. (2013, p. 61) argue that professional agency "is practiced when professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities." It can manifest itself in different ways, "not merely as entering into and suggesting new work practices, but also as maintaining existing practices, or struggling against suggested changes. Such agency is realized within socio-cultural constraints and bounded by the resources available, all of which encompass subjects' temporally-formed discursive, practical, and embodied relations to their work contexts" (2013, p. 61). Most importantly, agency is necessary for the reshaping or renegotiation of professional identities (2013, p. 48).

4 Conservators' Professional Identity—A First Look

The interviewed conservators unanimously expressed the feeling that their work is invisible to the public in general and not recognized or acknowledged by many of their colleagues in museums, especially the curators. The most salient aspects of the conservators' self-narratives are related to issues of subordination, vertical hierarchies, lack of authority in the decision-making process and social importance of the performed work. These factors all seem to be intertwined and negatively influence the conservator's professional identity. Most of the interviewees mentioned a subordinated relationship with curators, which they associate with negative aspects of the conservators' self-image and with their invisibility to others. In the 2019 *IIC Student & Emerging Conservator Conference – The Conservator's Reflection*, conservator Joanna Phillips,[7] when discussing the different conservator's pay scales in European and US museums, argued that conservators cannot collaborate with other disciplines and professionals if they are not regarded as equal players. Phillips, now director of the Conservation Centre in Düsseldorf (Germany), addressed the hierarchies between museum conservators and curators regarding agency, decision-making and remuneration, asserting that "These hierarchy legacies, where conservators are situated lower than curators do not only affect our day to day lives with low salaries and much frustration, they affect professional practices and research areas that are based on interdisciplinarity" (Phillips, IIC 2019, p. 35:15).

Literature on professional identity construction was particularly useful to reflect on the conservator's situation regarding hierarchies, visibility, and subordination. As a very high percentage of studies about professional identity focus on nurses and their hierarchical relationship with physicians, we could not avoid to notice

[7] See biographical note in https://joanna-phillips.tumblr.com/CV. Accessed 29 Sep 2019.

similarities between nurses and conservators. For example, the issue of visibility and subordination is mentioned quite often and seems to be associated with stereotypes.[8] Studies about nurses' professional identities establish that the role of the nurse is mainly associated with that of being the "doctor's handmaiden" (Bridges 1990; Ten Hoeve et al. 2013, p. 296) Their roles are linked to other professions (for example physicians) and they are subordinated to them. Like conservators, nurses are also related to a practical knowledge that is orally transferred. According to Heldal et al., "Traditionally, nurses have had an oral tradition regarding the transfer of skills and knowledge, while doctors have also relied on codified knowledge developed through extensive programmes to provide evidence" (Heldal et al. 2019, p. 4).[9]

5 From the Hand to the Mind: The Dominance of Science and the Emergence of a Professional Identity

This section intends to review some crucial aspects regarding the origins, consolidation and beliefs manifested in the history of the conservation profession. This summary resorts to the work of researchers who reviewed the history of the profession (Philippot 1996; Clavir 1998, 2002; Caple 2000; Villers 2004; Munõz Viñas 2005; Van Saaze 2013).

The various negative factors influencing the way conservators view their profession, in particular invisibility, seem to be rooted in part in an asymmetrical understanding of how knowledge is seen and used in conservation. The disconnection between body and mind, nature and culture, and objects and humans contribute to this situation (Hummelen et al. 2008),[10] and this might be at the root of stereotypes that are still incorporated in some professional values and beliefs.

Historically, restorers were craftsmen or artists with no training in science, history or ethics, who repaired or reconstructed the aesthetic appearance of an object according to their taste or the taste of those hiring them. The emancipation of conservation from restoration comes with science and its competence to focus on the object's nature and the condition of the materials. Miriam Clavir calls attention to the dominance of science, arguing that its methodology, knowledge and values are significant regarding the distinction between conservation and traditional restoration.

[8] With respect to the self-concept of nurses, we rely on the definition of Takase et al.: "'nurses' self-concept can be defined as information and beliefs that nurses have about their roles, values and behaviors" (2002, p. 197).

[9] See also (Richardson and Storr 2010). According to Summers and Summers (2009), historically nurses were subordinated by physicians for reasons that include the disparity of power between genders. In the case of conservators, the gender situation seems evident, because most of the professionals are women. The relation between gender and professional agency deserves further investigation in the field of conservation.

[10] For more on this asymmetry in the field of conservation, see Hummelen et al. (2008).

She adds that the legitimacy afforded by science grew in association with the large and powerful public museums, and that through science—within the framework, objectives and policy of the museum—conservation solidified as a profession (Clavir 2000, p. 24). Accordingly, the first conservation professionals were either scientists (chemists or physicists) or people with good manual skills (restorers).

Science continued to maintain its importance for the development of conservation as a practice and a body of knowledge without major questioning throughout the twentieth century. After World War II, however, the cleaning controversies involving the London National Gallery paintings revealed that a kind of rivalry had emerged, pitting a techno-science party, led by natural scientists, against an historical-humanist party, led mainly by art historians. The historical-humanist party argued for a decision-making process not only based on scientific, analytical methods but also influenced by values and contexts. Still, this party has been responsible for the development of principles and ideas (like minimal intervention, reversibility) that continue to be centred on physical integrity and material authenticity. As argued by Villers, these concepts "derive from a positivist paradigm of understanding and a belief in objectivity" (Villers 2004, p. 3). Muñoz Vinãs, who defines contemporary theory of conservation against classical theories, stresses that so-called "scientific" conservation "exemplifies many of the principles common to all classical theories" (Muñoz Viñas 2005, p. 75), and that the belief in objectivity of scientific conservation (its focus on facts and materials rather than ideas) has contributed to the notion that no philosophical foundation is necessary for it to work. In his view, scientific conservation deals with materials, not ideas, and in doing so, it employs its tools to apprehend the material world as hard sciences do (Muñoz Viñas 2005, pp. 79–80).

Contrary to classical theories, the so-called contemporary theory of conservation assumes that objects are conserved not only because of their physical materials, but also because of the cultural knowledge they embody. That knowledge is complex, multifaceted and related to different stakeholders. Therefore, it is important also to understand the meanings attributed to the object and to decide about the necessary measures to preserve its materials, appearance, function, information and so on.

6 Contemporary Art Conservation

The belief in the fundamental necessity to protect the integrity of the physical object and the confidence in science as the foundation for ethical preservation began to be challenged in contemporary art conservation when museums began to acquire artworks that were not meant to be collected. Installation art, happenings, performance art and other time-based media works contributed to creating an awareness of the fragile and complex nature of these artworks. Various aspects account for a significant challenge to conservation practices (Wharton and Molotch 2010), such as their variability in terms of space, time and values attributed; the absence of specific borders; and the instability of materials, equipment and status.

Consequently, the idea of managing change became more important than the attempt to freeze an object in time. As argued by van de Vall et al., "rather than preserving original objects, conservation of contemporary art should be thought of as managing change" (2011, p. 1). In the same vein, Wharton (2016, p. 34) argued that the increasing acceptance that an object is not a fixed thing but a "slow event,"[11] as well as the more active collaboration with curators and artists, prepared conservators—trained to preserve the original—for their new roles as collaborators in managing change of contemporary variable works.[12] The complexity of contemporary art also comes with the constant state of incompleteness of many artworks and their unfolding possibilities within the museum, which according to Laurenson brings valuable research opportunities. Leaning on sociologist Knorr Cetina's development of the concept of epistemic cultures, Laurenson proposes that artworks can be seen as epistemic objects of research for different people (artists, conservators, curators), while she also understands conservation as a knowledge-producing practice, stressing that the practice is impacted by the possibilities and nature of the artwork (Cetina 2007; Laurenson 2016).

According to Van Saaze, contemporary art conservation involves a distributed decision-making process, in which a vast and diverse number of people collaborate, ranging from the living artist or their heirs, personal assistants, former curators, present curators and gallerists to registrars, art historians, architects, exhibition designers, acquisition and loan managers and technology experts. This opens different ways of interacting, and a need to rethink crucial notions in conservation,[13] including the role of the conservator. Van Saaze described contemporary art conservation as part of a network of objects and subjects, where different kinds of knowledge collaborate to ensure the care and sustaining of this heritage. Building on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that focuses on the practices enacted and produced by networks of humans and non-humans,[14] Van Saaze argues that the contemporary art conservator (like the curator) can be considered "an interpreter, mediator or even a (co-) producer of what is designated as the 'artist's intention'" (2013, p. 33).

[11] Wharton (2016, p. 34) attributes the description of an object as a "slow event" to Stanley Eveling (University of Edinburgh) in an unpublished paper.

[12] For the purposes of this chapter, the idea of "managing change" is only addressed from the point of view of contemporary art conservation. It should be mentioned, however, that researchers from other areas, particularly those related to ethnographic objects, archeology and historic sites or landscapes were the ones who started to challenge the "freezing paradigm" eliciting the idea of conservation as a managing change activity (see for example Avrami et al. 2000; Muñoz Viñas 2005; Clavir 2002; Villers 2004; Sully 2013).

[13] "The developments in artistic practices therefore ask for a rethinking of certain concepts and established principles that belong to traditional conservation strategies, such as the notions of 'original', 'copy', 'minimal intervention', 'authenticity', 'reversibility', and 'artist's intention'" (Van Saaze 2013, p. 23).

[14] Originally developed by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon (Callon 1986; Latour 1987), ANT has many ramifications and relations with other theories and research contexts. Vivian van Saaze was the first to use it in the context of conservation in art museums.

The discussions that over the last two decades have arisen from the nature of the objects, and the necessity to find solutions, have contributed to a transformation of the practice of conservation, whereby it is not so much seen anymore as an objectivity-based practice but as rather a systemic and relational one. The role of the conservator has followed this orientation. In contemporary art conservation theory and practice, the professional role of the conservator has shifted away from earlier concepts and towards the role of reflective practitioner and knowledge producer, involved in networks that change the artworks along with museum processes.

In the following section, I briefly address the context of the art museum to assess whether there is room for positive factors that may affect and encourage renegotiation of the conservator's professional identity.

7 The Contemporary Art Museum: Knowledge, Collaboration and Communication

New museology recognized the fundamental role of the museum and opened a critical debate about its authoritative and informative character. In this vein, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) reminds us how museums are creations of the Enlightenment, when the importance of reason and rationality increased to displace the superstitions and subjective knowledges of earlier periods. Drawing on Lyotard's thoughts about the "grand narratives" or "metaprescriptions" developed with a universal determination, the author argues that museums were set up and developed to disseminate such more reason-based, objective picture of the world. She stresses that the Enlightenment inherited the dream of Descartes to base all knowledge on what could be deduced from reason alone. In other words, reason became the new authority, meant to ground a 'true' worldview. And it was this way of thinking and doing that produced the split between mind and body and the predominance of the mind over the body in Western society (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p. 13).

New museology also advocated a critical examination of the museum practices and the structures that inform and sustain them, calling attention to the behind-the-scenes relationships between professionals, artworks and audiences and encouraging new ways of communication and expression. Despite its solid criticism, focusing on the social and the political inside and outside of museums, practices seem to not have significatively changed (McCall and Gray 2014, p. 20). New museology, however, called attention to many important aspects, particularly the transmission model used by museums, centred on the exhibition, where "the curator as scholar, expert on the collections and knowledgeable about the relevant discipline, leads the project, chooses the objects for display and decides what to say in the text panels and labels" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p. 25).

Post-critical museology, a term coined by Dewdney et al. (2013) and informed by Latourian thought and anchored in practice theory, goes beyond new museology

arguments by claiming that "theory is meaningless if not related to real practice."[15] As the authors argue, there will not be a change in the museum without a relational approach, and they point out that contexts in which the academy and the museum function as separate entities, whereby one (the academy) is detached from the everyday practices of the other, will not contribute to transforming its traditional structure.

For this reason, post-critical museology proposes that museums be centred on the audience. This will involve a hybrid or "distributed museum" where all those who operate in and across the organizations and communication networks contribute to a reconfiguration of the traditional museum conception (Dewdney et al. 2013, p. 239).[16] The authors emphasize the importance of all actors being part of the networks of humans and objects, including the professionals who work behind the scenes. In the distributed or post-critical museum, all is interrelated, the various roles, elements and activities cannot be separated and only take on meaning in the performative action involved.

Post-critical museology rejects representational models of society, individuals and action, while also abandoning the traditional concepts of labour, class and community, and, instead, seeking "to network the agency of group formation and point to new ecologies of belonging" (Dewdney et al. 2013, p. 241). This framework has the potential for radical transformation of the art museum and therefore may help overcome the negative factors related to the conservation profession. With its focus on the relational and performative nature of the networks of objects and humans, it questions hierarchies and challenges the old model of the curator-centred museum, proposing a distribution of knowledge and agency across the network. In the following section, I apply this post-critical approach to the empirical research, while also providing some hints as to how this approach can be transformative for the conservation profession in the museum context.

8 Roles, Visibility, Agency

Returning to the empirical information it is quite clear that the data collected from the research does not conform to this collaborative, transdisciplinary and reflexive view of the art museum. In fact, conservators reported that they rarely seem to feel part of a network, where they are regarded as equals. Both in our interviews with conservators and in the presentations at the conference *Emerging Conservators*, the

[15] Post-critical museology is a term coined by the authors of the book with the same name. The publication is one of the outcomes of *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture*, a three-year collaborative research project carried out at Tate Britain in London and geared to a reconfiguration of the relationship between art and audiences, including exploration of issues of global migration and the new media ecologies.

[16] Just as museum professionals become the audience, those previously conceived as the audience of the museum become producers of the distributed museum (Dewdney et al. 2013, p. 240).

professional boundary between conservators and curators was easy to notice. Conservators portray curators as a group of professionals who generally do not understand or value the tasks conservators perform. The notion that curators do intellectual work and conservators manual work persists in the conservator's narratives.

The professional boundary between conservators and curators and the association of both professional roles to body (conservator) and mind (curator) is hardly new. In 2007 Leslie Carlyle, then Head of Conservation at Tate, said at the opening of the conference *Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles*: "historically conservators, curators and art historians are stuck in a rut made by centuries-old debate about the value of the hand versus the mind" (Carlyle 2007). As nurses, who depend on doctors to make decisions (Ten Hoeve et al. 2013, p. 296) conservators also depend on curators, meaning that they are not seen as autonomous professionals. Throughout our research, conservators often affirmed that they do not feel entitled to make decisions. In the contemporary art museum, where the principal functions are related to exhibitions and artworks' acquisition, most conservators say that, although they might be consulted, they do not decide about the final appearance of artworks in exhibitions, not even in installations in which they interviewed the artist and accompanied the whole process. In these cases, the final decision is in the hands of the curator. A small fraction of the respondents, mainly working in large-scale museums, reported that they are involved in interdisciplinary and interprofessional team meetings, but very few feel they are heard.

Concerning acquisitions, a high percentage of the interviewees reported that they are not given a seat at the table of final decisions. They are consulted—asked to give a formal, written or informal opinion—but their statements are often ignored. According to conservators, curators make the final decision on the artworks to propose to the owner, museum director or board of trustees for acquisition. Conservators are the mediators. Moreover, they describe themselves as the professionals equipped with the knowledge to evaluate the cost of maintaining or replacing components of a work of art. But they are not present in meetings with those who make the decisions about acquiring a work of art or not.

Lack of agency and autonomy in decision-making are critical issues in how conservators see themselves and how they feel to be seen by others. Concerning this subject, in the panel 'Conservators Meet the Institutions' at the conference *Emerging Conservators*, Joanna Phillips mentioned a brochure on a website of the German Museum Association (*Deutscher Museumsbund*), which includes a specific definition of the roles of the conservator and the curator: "the curator plans and controls the archiving and inventory programs and oversees the conservation and restoration of the collections including their documentation."[17] The conservator "develops, with the curator's agreement, all the activities that serve the preservation and preventive conservation and restoration of the museum's collections." Where applicable, the conservator executes the previously predetermined restoration work. These descriptions underscore the limited professional agency assigned to

[17] Deutscher Museumsbund e.V. 2008, 20-3 (Phillips IIC, 2019).

conservators.[18] The curator needs to give permission to all activities developed by the conservator, while the curator "plans", "controls" and "oversees", even including "restoration work."

As mentioned, this lack of agency and decision-making power seems to be connected to the type of knowledge involved and has much influence on professional identity. Conservators are always associated with manual work and 'knowing-how', rather than with 'knowing that', with tacit or embodied knowledge.[19] On the other hand, conservation emancipated from restoration through expertise derived from the natural sciences. Science helped conservation to move away from subjective restoration to a more objective-based practice (Clavir 2002).

Despite the theoretical criticism led by the new museology and post-critical museology, my research established that conservators in their narratives largely feel to inhabit a curator-led and hierarchized museum, where the curator's knowledge represents the respected and privileged expertise. The importance of knowledge has been studied in organizations, as professionals operate and interact according to their knowledge and "knowing". Cook and Brown (1999) discuss the relation between explicit and tacit knowledge (and also knowing and knowledge). They remind us that for the last three centuries Western culture has been profoundly influenced by the Cartesian epistemology that privileges explicit rather than tacit knowledge. Cook and Brown recall that we are taught to "best minimize or 'control for' the clouding influences of our senses and subjective impressions through analytical reasoning, and thus acquire our most reliable knowledge about the world." Tacit knowledge and knowing how seem to be overlooked.[20]

My aim here is not so much to reflect on the nature of conservation or the role of the conservator as such, however. The concerns are all interrelated and the fact that the art museum professions of care deal with the same epistemic objects from

[18] Joanna Phillips claims that there are several differences between the way conservators are seen in Europe and in the United States. In 2008, Phillips, originally trained as a conservator in Germany, moved to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where she launched the first media conservation lab in a US museum. According to her testimony, not only the Guggenheim but generally in the US, museums place great importance on interdisciplinarity and cross-departmental teamwork. She explains that curators and conservators, exhibition designers, technicians and registrars all work closely together, particularly in exhibitions, acquisitions and loans. "The different disciplines respect each other's areas of competence and decisions are made together as a group" (Phillips IIC 2019).

[19] In his book *Conservation Skills: Judgment, Method and Decision Making*, Caple identifies the "technician" as the first stereotype. He states that "where others decide (curators, archeologists, museum directors) the conservator implements the decision." Caple identifies other stereotypes (scientist, parent/mother/nurse, naysayer, frustrated curator) and the "artist/craftsman/restorer". In fact, both technicians and craftsmen have a direct connection with the manual labor that science overrides. This kind of labor, according to Caple, is associated with a lack of decision-making power (Caple 2000, p. 184).

[20] According to Poliany, tacit knowledge is tied to the human body. His famous example about riding a bicycle says that when riding a bicycle, we don't use any analytical tools. Through practice and training we make it possible for our neural and muscular system to do it. But we cannot really explain to anyone how we do it. See (Cook and Brown 1999, p. 384).

different epistemic cultures should be stressed for the sake of the objects, the professionals, and the underlying social dynamics.

In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour claims that the seventeenth century created these dichotomies, separating sciences and politics, nature and culture, humans and non-humans, thus creating a series of subsequent dichotomies that are still entrenched in many discourses and practices. His work has informed important studies in conservation and museum studies research, some of them cited in this chapter. The relationships between artworks, people involved in their care, the market, organizations, and institutions that purchase, store, conserve and exhibit them are part of complex networks that, as well argued by Van Saaze, keep transforming these objects (van Saaze 2013).

The construction and renegotiation of conservator's professional identity should be seen in this light, as conservators are part of these relational and hybrid networks of professionals and objects where different kinds of knowledge converge in everyday practices, according to different scenarios.

9 Conclusion

In this chapter I focused on the professional identity of the conservator in the contemporary art museum, by considering the emergence and development of the conservation profession, the complexity and relational functions performed by contemporary art conservators and the social-professional dynamics of the art museum and its potential to accommodate change. Most of the conservator respondents identified the invisibility of the conservator, as confirmed by participants in the conference *Emerging Conservators*. As my research revealed, lack of agency or effective participation in decision-making and subordination feature as both cause and consequence of this "invisibility". Manual labour and the type of knowledge (tacit) associated with the conservator, as linked in particular to the origins of the profession, seem to be responsible for stereotypes that negatively influence the conservator's professional identity. On the other hand, according to the information collected in the interviews, we may confirm that the radical transformations proposed by both new museology and post-critical museology have not yet taken place, which compromises the renegotiation of the conservator's professional identity.

The politics behind apparent hierarchies and social relationships are strongly influenced by more complex structures derived from both social, political and economic powers. The purpose of this chapter was to address a *status quo* fed by different actants/actors. The unfolding of these other causes may be pursued in a subsequent situated study developed in a wider range of institutions.

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Rita Macedo is an Associate Professor at the Department of Conservation and Restoration at NOVA, School of Science and Technology (Portugal). She trained in Art History and has worked in the field of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage since her PhD in Conservation. Macedo has coordinated the first research project on *Documentation of Contemporary Art in Portugal* (2011–2014). This collaborative project involved major Portuguese contemporary art museums and aimed to gather and produce documentation to conserve complex contemporary artworks that were critically endangered. Between 2011 and 2019, she was part of *NeCCAR* (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) and *NACCA* (Marie Sklodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network 2016–2019). As part of *NACCA*, she coordinated a research project titled 'Contemporary Art Conservators and Curators: Roles, Collaboration, Training, and Ethics', focusing on the perspective of conservators. More recently, Macedo has focused on the intersection of living heritage and the concept of the museum. In 2020, she joined the European project *T-Factor* (Horizon 2020), which aims to promote social regeneration in cities through temporary uses. She is conducting research to create a bottom-up museum that aims to foster community development, a sense of belonging, as well as learning environments. Throughout her career, Macedo has developed a variety of national and international collaborations that resulted in the establishment of research teams and projects. She has built an innovative and dynamic team of young researchers who have successfully tackled a variety of challenges in heritage conservation.