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DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

Against Dissociation: Documentation as the Object of Care

Aga Wielocha (Bern)

> Archivists appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built. In turn, notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate their authority. [Kaplan 2000]

Introduction

In recent decades, the constantly expanding category of artworks that defy established collecting strategies has posed a challenge to the existing institutional frameworks and protocols, which were built around 'traditional' artworks that exist as contained, fairly static physical objects. Those other artworks termed in the field as 'unruly' actors of the institutional realm [Domínguez Rubio 2014] or as entities that 'queer' established museum conventions and practices [Castriota 2021a] are those that involve or combine technology and performance, or are inherently intermedial, relational, processual, participatory or concept-based. Because the category of 'other' covers such a significant swath of contemporary art production, sociologist Nathalie Heinich contends that contemporary art should be considered a new paradigm of artistic practice, in which "the artwork is no longer exclusively the actual object proposed by the artist, but rather the whole set of operations, actions, interpretations, etc., brought about by this proposition" [Heinich 2014: 35].

The operations and actions that result from an artist's proposal are frequently recorded in documentation, either at the same time as the artwork's creation, prior to or during its acquisition into a collection, or subsequently during the artwork's life as a part of a collection. In addition, many contemporary artworks necessitate assembly and installation in space to become accessible to the public, and this process often follows guidelines established by the artist. Further to regulating the display of a contemporary artwork, the creator might also dictate the manner in which the artwork is to be preserved and interacted with. Interestingly, while some contemporary works are hybrids of rules and objects, others are constituted entirely by rules [Irvin 2022]. These rules, which often play a critical role in the interpretation and comprehension of the artwork, are also frequently provided as, or recorded in documentation. Yet, documentation, both as a practice and as a collection of documents created around an artwork, is a contentious concept, as it has the potential to freeze a work that is inherently mutable by determining its form and thus limiting its potential evolution. Nonetheless, as this article suggests, the future of an artwork is not solely determined by how it is documented, but also by how the documentation is understood, conceptualised, and cared for.

This article employs a conservation lens, understanding conservation as both a field of study and a practice. It seeks to investigate the varied approaches, objectives, methods, and infrastructures utilized in the documentation of contemporary art, as well as the diverse types of documents generated by artworks, with a particular emphasis on institutional settings. It advocates for a shift in the importance of documentation within the existing modern, object-oriented structure of the museum. Without disavowing the necessity to create new, structured documents during the artwork's institutional life, and without going so far as to revolutionize existing museum systems, this article reveals the complexity of the issue, provides a theoretical framework for addressing it, puts forward example solutions, and analyses the benefits and drawbacks of the suggested approach.

Protecting or shaping? Debates around the notion of artwork's identity

To render 'unruly' works collectable and preservable within a museum context while steering away from traditional concepts of authenticity based on material integrity, recent debates around the conservation of contemporary art have increasingly adopted the notion of an artwork having an identity [Laurenson 2006; Giebeler, Sartorius and Heydenreich 2019: 24]. An artwork's identity is understood to be constituted by properties considered significant, essential, or work-defining [Laurenson 2006]. As a result, the objective of preservation has expanded beyond achieving an object's material fixity, moving instead towards encompassing the long-term protection of its identity. In consequence, the notion of identity has been incorporated into conservation practice, for instance through the implementation of so-called Identity Reports. First proposed as a part of a model for documenting time-based media art at the Guggenheim [Phillips 2015], identity reports have proliferated across other, especially large-scale institutions in the Anglosphere.[1] In most cases, the artwork's identity is recorded in documentation using pre-established templates, which are designed for particular types of artworks, usually those that fall under the category of time-based media. These templates are created in-house and adapted to the organisational structures and workflows of a specific institution.

Yet, the idea of pinning down identity by singling out or determining its significant properties through predesigned templates has been criticized by various theorists and practitioners, especially for inherently mutable works that evolve or expand, as it might reduce the artwork to a fixed, discrete, coherent, stable, and repeatable museum object. An artwork does not necessarily stop evolving once it is acquired by a museum, and shouldn't be perceived as "an organic or functional whole possessing a singular identity" [van de Vall et al. 2011]. Likewise, the notion of an artwork's identity "should be recognised not as an innate, fundamental essence, ground, or core – unearthed, documented, and protected from erosion by diligent conservators – but a perspectival impression of significance that may differ from person to person and over time" [Castriota 2021a: 18-19]. Furthermore, the process of assessing which properties are the most significant often relies on the artist's specifications, which might not be well articulated, may change over time, and may be determined by who is performing the task. With all this in mind, is it possible to establish a methodology for documenting an artwork's identity which is non-singular or in flux without jeopardising its variability?

Several methods exist for capturing artworks' identities through documentation without conflicting with their propensity to change. In response to the limitations of the rigid structures of the collection management systems (CMS) employed in large-scale museums to catalogue and manage collectables, which are often designed for stable works and represent the 'single-artist, single-artwork' paradigm [van Saaze 2013], museums have begun to examine alternative solutions. For instance, SFMOMA has experimented with adapting MediaWiki as a platform for collaborative work on a digital dossier of pieces from their media art collection. Instead of filling in a predesigned template or carefully entering data in a structured database following narrowly defined guidelines, content management systems such as MediaWiki allow for the development of a narrative about the work, and therefore enable the documentation to be shaped in terms of both content and form [Barok, Noordegraaf and de Vries 2019]. The system is configurable and adaptable to the circumstances of the artwork and comes with version-tracking functions and a built-in system for referencing, which makes it possible to understand how the content was shaped, who shaped it, and where the entered information came from. Still, one-sided narratives, even when constructed collaboratively, can potentially fail in representing an artwork's variability. Moreover, implementing multiperspectivity is an art of its own that requires special skills and time, which are often limited even in large-scale collecting institutions.

Artworks' documentation in a museum realm

Most of the discourses around the documentation of contemporary artworks in a museum context are focused on creating new content and documents by using assorted tools and methods, from forms, templates and questionaries to databases and software. However, contemporary artworks generate both structured and unstructured documents even before entering the museum realm. According to philosopher Peter Osborne, contemporary art has a post-conceptual character, understood here as a

historical-ontological condition, and therefore an artwork can no longer be conceived of as a closed, autonomous, or self-sufficient entity that remains identical to itself everywhere and at all times. Instead, it adopts different shapes depending on context [Osborne 2018]. As such, an artwork may be represented solely by various kinds of documents, be they textual, visual or object-based, and may need to be not only assembled but often actually executed or performed in order to be displayed and made accessible. In other cases, the physical object may remain muted in the absence of documents that explain how the artwork is meant to address the audience. Those documents, produced or generated for a variety of purposes, also bear traces of the artwork's identity, register its variability, and record how the work transforms.

In other words, the identity of a contemporary artwork is distributed between art objects and documents, or, in the absence of stable and fixed art objects, simply between the variety of documents produced during the artwork's career [Wielocha 2021a]. Yet, despite the recognition of the weight of the intangible characteristics of contemporary artworks registered in documentation, museums usually do not consider the two categories of documents and art objects as having equal importance. While the art objects enter the collection – traditionally the museum's core – the documents are deposited in various, both stable and provisional archives, which often fulfil an auxiliary function. The practices related to collecting and collection care are prioritised accordingly. Upon acquisition, art objects need to be crated, insured, shipped, registered, catalogued, checked and stored in appropriate conditions. In comparison, the efforts and resources allocated to the care of documentation tend to be significantly smaller.

But let us have a closer look at what we mean when we speak about artwork-related documentation seen from a museum perspective. Conventionally, it encompasses the description of an artwork's physical characteristics, various related contextual or interpretive writings, and any information required to manage it [Seren 2001]. It may consist of various types of documents of mixed provenance [Haylett 2019].

1) The first type is information supplied by the artist, the artist's studio, a former owner, or the gallery that facilitated the artwork's purchase or acquisition. This category covers drawings, sketches, certificates, installation manuals or instructions, artist's statements, etc.

2) The second category is information gathered by the institution on the artwork's biography and the context of its creation, including the artwork's provenance, exhibition history, information about the artist, and a description of similar artworks by the artist held in other collections.

3) The third category includes documents coproduced by the artist, her studio, estate or gallery and the institution, such as contracts, pre-acquisition questionnaires, communication with artists, and interviews.

4) The fourth type comprises documents produced by the museum during the institutional life of the artwork, for example, descriptions, visual documentation, technical manuals, equipment lists, display requirements, condition reports, loan agreements, treatment reports, iteration reports, etc. The fifth type consists of documents produced by the artwork itself, such as records of interaction with the public for participatory works [Haylett 2019]. This last category often includes physical objects, such as props produced for a particular iteration of a performance piece, or obsolete functional equipment that bears witness to the artwork's technological history.

Even though all the above-mentioned categories might overlap and intermingle, one will still always run into documents that do not fit any of them. The way the documentation of a musealium can be outlined and organized within an art museum varies from one institution to the next and depends on a museum's history, subject, scale and structure. Still, there are various common approaches, procedures, workflows and standards [Wythe 2004].

Usually, the record of a musealium in the CMS includes all the basic factual data about an artwork, as well as references to other sources of information. However, until recently many systems did not allow for storing and managing multiple graphic and textual documents [Barok, Noordegraaf, and de Vries 2019], which are therefore frequently placed in various micro-archives, both analogue and

digital.[2] The way the documents are dispersed among these archives varies depending on an institution's departmental structure. For instance, correspondence with an artist about a collected artwork may be kept in the acquiring curator's private archive, while information on how an artwork should be displayed may be found in the records of an exhibition in which it was presented [Wielocha 2021b]. Numerous institutions work with so-called 'object files' or 'object dossiers' that compile essential information related to artworks and allow this information to be shared between departments and with the public, mostly by appointment. Still, the content of 'object files' and the way information is organised and gathered changes from museum to museum; even within a single institution, different departments might run their own 'object files' e.g., curatorial object files or conservation object files [Wythe 2004; Hölling 2018; Wielocha 2021].

What is what? A thin line between the artwork and its documentation

Sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio introduced the notion of 'artwork constituency', based on the observation that artworks usually enter museums not as a single 'object' but as a part of what he calls a 'constituency', which consists of all the elements that are acquired together with the artwork. Ranging from frames and vitrines to documents like contracts, installation instructions or artist notes, all these items "define the boundaries of the artwork" and establish its meaning and value, such that an artwork is in fact "inseparable from its constituency" [Domínguez Rubio 2014: 628]. The first operation before accessioning an artwork into the museum's inventory is to classify its components and distribute them among various physical locations and, more importantly, among value-based categories that separate the 'art' from the 'non-art' [Domínguez Rubio 2020; 2014]. The classification principle has traditionally been the 'aesthetic value' that characterises artworks, and those elements of the 'artwork constituency' that possess this value become a part of the museum collection, falling under the supervision of curators and conservators. Those that have been classified as 'non-art', but recognised as bearing other values, such as for research or legal purposes, are often placed elsewhere, and are frequently dissociated from the artwork. This categorisation emerged partly thanks to the physical properties of conventional artworks understood as objects – especially paintings. The artwork's ability to be classified and translated into the museum's standards is crucial for it to be included in the processes related to the circulation of information and coordination of inter-institutional actions.

Yet, the twofold categories of 'art' and 'non-art' have proved controversial in the case of less object-centred contemporary art, both historical and recent. A good example is the legacy of Fluxus, an international movement of artists active in the 1960s and 1970s. With their roots in experimental music, Fluxus works often follow instruction-based logic that manifest in graphic notations or scores that are meant to be executed and performed publicly or intimately by other artists and non-artists. The scores instruct potential performers on the parameters of a work and the outcome can manifest as an object, a live performance, or both. What is the relationship between a score and its manifestation if the latter is acquired into a museum collection? Is the score a documentation or an autonomous artwork? Is a documentation of a score's interpretation art or non-art? Traditional categories of art and documentation applied by a collecting institution to such a body of work can result in disassociation between the material and immaterial features of the artworks. Currently, remnants of Fluxus activities are collected and preserved as both artworks and archival materials, with the classification often based on their aesthetic qualities, discreteness, or self-sufficiency, ultimately determining the approach to their care and conservation.[3]

A contemporary artwork is potentially variable in terms of media, and as such is not tied to any particular materialisation, but rather to the totality of its materialisations over time, with an immanently constructive and processual character. As such, each materialization in turn becomes documentation, which suggests that a contemporary artwork comprises its own documentation and, to the extent that it proliferates and its iterations are collected, even becomes its own archive [Osborne, 2018]. This observation offers an alternative perspective that reconceptualizes contemporary artworks as archives, wherein the documentation of the artwork assumes an equally significant role as the physical art object itself. The notion and model of artwork-as-an-archive introduced [Hölling 2013] and theorised [Wielocha 2021b] recently in the field of conservation of contemporary art, encompasses all kinds of

documents produced by an artwork, textual or objectual. This archive is an open-ended set with a rhizomatic structure and a dynamic system containing interrelated documents that represent an artwork. The archive determines the nature and shapes the identity of contemporary artworks, as the decisions that influence future materialisations or activations of artworks are and will be made based on the archive. This theoretical construct embraces the possibility and inevitability of the artwork changing and redefines the conservator's role as that of "maintaining the artwork's identity through the interpretation and actualisation of the archive" [Hölling 2013: 254]. However, prior to actualisation and interpretation, the content of the archive should first be secured, and although it seems that there is no better place to secure things than a museum, this task is often not as straightforward as it might seem.

Documents as objects of care

Whereas the Fluxus legacy example revealed the ontological challenge of distinguishing between artworks and documentation, the present section endeavours to illustrate how this differentiation is put into practice within institutions today. In the digital era, an 'average' artwork (e.g., an installation with video components) acquired by an institution often comes as a file delivered on an external drive (carrier) in fancy packaging.[4] Besides digital objects, the drive contains a pdf file with a so-called 'installation manual' that explains how to display the piece. It can contain technical drawings delineating the dimensions of the exhibition space, diagrams explaining how to connect the audio-visual equipment to obtain a desired result, specifying the type of lighting, and sometimes even describing how the work should be perceived by the viewer. This document may not have been authored by the artist directly, but rather by the artist's assistant, gallery, studio, or sometimes even by a technical team at a venue where the work was previously shown. The manual might have been produced concurrently with the artwork or a posteriori, in order to facilitate its acquisition and future display. Some of the manuals are carefully designed with a sophisticated layout, while others may be of surprisingly low quality (e.g., handwritten notes on a blurry printout from an inkjet printer that was low on blue ink, digitised with a low-quality smartphone camera). Some are very technical and detailed, others generic and even cryptic.

After acquisition, the digital art object is scrutinised by the museum team, tested, catalogued, and ingested into the digital repository with restricted access, equipped with a system for backup and verification of data integrity. The carrier and packaging, regarded as objects originating from the artist, are often considered 'a part of the artwork' and registered in the collection management system as the artwork's components. But this is not a standard treatment of the installation manual that might be simply saved on a museum server or printed out and included in the physical folder of the 'object dossier'. If the installation manual is sent to the acquiring curator via email instead of being handed to the institution with the art object, it might skip formal delivery procedures. This could result in the manual being stored on the curator's personal hard drive, leading to a precarious status for this critical document. Once the artwork is installed in the venue, the manual might get updated to include the newest display equipment or the specificity of the display venue, or even be substituted by new guidelines recorded in an Iteration Report produced by the conservation department.[5] This does not mean that the document will be intentionally discarded, but rather, being considered a mere technical sheet, it runs the risk of becoming dissociated from the work. It is worth noting that not all installation manuals provided during acquisitions serve their primary purpose as well as they could. Instructions may be inaccurately transcribed by the studio technician, or important details may be omitted. Instructions might have been recorded based on an incorrect execution or altered by the venue in order to ensure viewers' safety. However, in all cases, this document is critical evidence of the possible behaviour of the artwork, the artist's approach, or her creative process, and as such is key to the course of the artwork's individuation and the formation of its identity.

A simple way to secure installation manuals and ensure that they remain associated with the artworks to which they refer, would be to consider such documents as being on par with other object-based elements in an artwork's constituency, such as its carrier or packaging, and afford it the same amount of care and attention. That would mean, for instance, registering them as one of the artwork components in the collection management system and storing them in a digital repository [fig.

1].[6] However, installation manuals are just one of the many types of artwork-related documents, and because of their autonomous nature, it is relatively easy to treat them in a similar manner as other object-based components. But what about the correspondence leading up to the acquisition? In many large institutions, important emails, or in some cases all emails, are often backed up and saved in the institutional archive but accessing them might prove challenging, and its linkage with an artwork can be easily broken. In the future, technology will likely allow us to preserve these associations more easily, but the effective and sustainable application of technical solutions requires clear objectives and frameworks to be defined.[7]

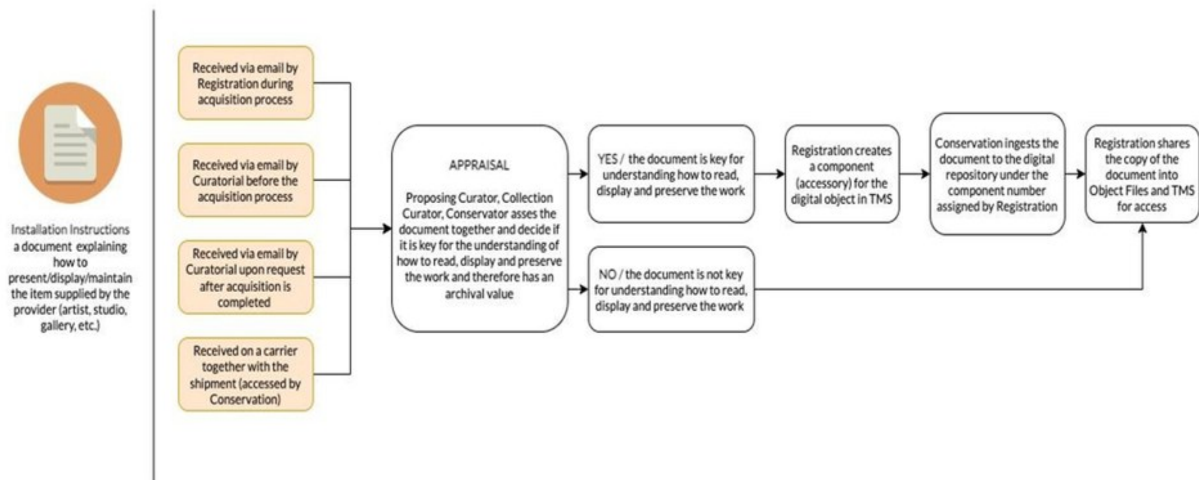

Figure 1 — Workflow for securing artist provided installation instructions in a museum context.

Artworks as archives and the aftermath of the shift

To facilitate the conversion of artwork documentation into an object of care, this article proposes an approach that considers contemporary artworks as archives, not simply as a metaphor, but in practice. This approach places a strong emphasis on applying archival methodology and leveraging available technical solutions. Following *respect des fonds*, one of the core tenets of archival practice, the origin of such an archive would be the artwork itself. The archive could be structured following an assumption that the artwork generates and receives documents similarly to how an institution or individual does. Pursuing this line of thinking, the museum's collection of artworks would become a collection of archives, and the identity of an artwork would be best manifested in the 'finding aid' which reflects the archive's intellectual order.

Why might this model help institutions to better protect the variable identities of contemporary artworks, before or in parallel to registering them in a structured manner? To begin with, the artwork as an archive is a common source of information about the artwork that facilitates equal access to and distribution of information and prevents the exercise of authority based on the appropriation of knowledge [Wielocha 2021b]. Instead of dictating what the artwork is, what it does, and how it should be perpetuated, the model offers space for collecting and producing diverse, often competing micro-stories that foster alternative interpretations and broaden possibilities concerning the artwork's future shape.

Secondly, this model helps shift the concept of conservation within the museum away from a set of object-oriented actions performed by conservators, and over toward a collaborative effort encompassing the whole institution. A musealised 'artwork as archive' ceases to consist only of art objects, in order to embrace documents gathered and produced by the artwork's stakeholders and the artwork itself. In turn, the artwork's continuation relies not only on conservators but also, and explicitly,

on other institutional actors. The artwork-as-archive model emphasises the contribution to and responsibility for the perpetuation of an artwork as the common task of a long list of figures: curators and educators who collect, produce and promote interpretations; archivists and registrars who gather and organise knowledge produced within the institution; photographers and audio-visual technicians who document and install artworks in galleries; event coordinators responsible for producing and staging the artworks, etc. The emphasis on conservation as a common task might help to overcome the divisions between different organisational domains, thereby making it a more attainable reality.

Thirdly, the model pushes museums to reconsider the act of acquisition as more than just purchasing art objects, instead extending it to the production and gathering of documentation within the process – and consequently to have this reflected in acquisition budgets. From this perspective, without collecting documents that carry the artwork's identity, the acquisition would not be considered complete. Fourthly, it fosters a need to build an infrastructure to facilitate collecting understood as documenting, and to create a space for documents to interact with each other as a network. Finally, it helps to embrace the archive as a complementary component of the collection-care framework, and places it on the same level of priorities as the-state-of-the-art hi-tech storage systems that host art objects.

Still, questions remain as to the practical implications of considering artworks as archives. The unique features of digital archiving raise the temptation to collect and archive everything, just in case. However, as computer scientist Serge Abiteboul has remarked, by attempting to collect and archive everything, one could fall into the trap of Funes the Memorious, from the eponymous story by Jorge Luis Borges, who remembers everything but understands nothing. "The act of abstracting is a form of forgetting – we must forget some details to gain insight into the broader world around us. And herein lies the existential problem of digital memory – the choice of what to forget" [Abiteboul 2018: 226]. This observation points to another problem that calls for additional research: what are the drawbacks of accumulation as a method for preservation in the age of sustainable development? Instead of one or ten (physical or digital) objects that are in need of constant care and maintenance, institutions will need to deal with tens or hundreds of archival collections, series and individual items, that need to be assessed, collected, organized, catalogued, stored, preserved and made accessible, all of which requires funding and resources. Furthermore, digital preservation is intrinsically linked to energy consumption, and the intense use of hardware required to keep digital files alive directly contributes to climate change.[8] Both issues can be addressed by establishing guidelines for responsible appraisal, but choices on what to keep and what to discard can easily turn into a form of exercising power over the artwork's identity and consequently over its future.

Conversely, the upkeep of the archive could potentially facilitate decisions regarding the disposal of physical objects which bear no meaning for the artwork anymore, such as obsolete equipment, memory sticks and hard drives, packaging, exhibition furniture, etc. Yet, what actually requires more energy – storing a physical object in a climate-controlled vault, or storing its entire body of documentation in a digital repository? What is 'safer' in terms of preservation? Are we, as a society, ready to embrace the shift away from art as an authentic, original, artist-made physical thing, to a narrative about something that can potentially be materialized and therefore experienced in multifarious ways? These and other questions will inevitably guide future research related not only to the preservation of contemporary art, but, more broadly, to safeguarding all forms cultural production.

[1] The example of the Guggenheim has been followed, for instance, by MOMA, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney, and the Met. An Identity Report is compiled by the responsible institution based on gathered information, ranging from research into the previous iterations of the work and variable assemblages of components to artist statements.

[2] It is important to note that collection management systems are mostly created by private companies and are undergoing constant development. Consequently, many of the deficiencies described in the literature in the last decade have progressively been addressed and fixed. This does not mean, however, that all new features are implemented in museums immediately; such implementation often depends on an institution's scale and resources.

[3] For instance, at MoMA, the Silverman Fluxus Collection is split into three parts: works of art in the Department of Drawings and Prints, documentation in the Museum Archives, and publications in the Library [Feldman 2011].

[4] For an example of fancy packaging of an entirely digital artwork see: "Why M+ Acquired YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' Entire Body of Work (Past and Future)", https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/yhchi-acquisition/, accessed 25 December 2022.

[5] Together with Identity Report, Iteration Report is an element of *Documentation Model for Time-Based Media Art* and focuses on describing a new realization of an artwork in terms of its components and their installation, while maintaining a direct reference to the identity of the work by recording deviations made from earlier realizations [Phillips 2015].

[6] The author's attempt to implement this solution in a large-scale museum was unsuccessful. The main argument against it was that the solution would increase the amount of work required for managing the collection. In the everyday life of a museum, the movement of artworks (and in consequence their components) is strictly regulated and meticulously tracked by specific employees, usually registrars. The more components registered in the collection management system under one accession number, the more difficult and labour intensive it is to control and track the artwork's location.

[7] Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam was an early user of a document management system called "360°" across the institution, including collection documentation. This system allows to link documents generated by the institution, correspondence included, with the records in collection management system [Wielocha 2021b: 241].

[8] Although data centres are becoming more energy efficient, thanks to constant advances in new technology, other issues arise, such as fast hardware obsolescence or higher-quality digitisation resulting in larger amounts of data [Zastrow 2022].

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