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Article: Becoming a chief of objects

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# BECOMING A CHIEF OF OBJECTS

ANNE DE BUCK

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## ABSTRACT

The installation artwork *Voorstelling* (1997) by the Japanese-Dutch artist Suchan Kinoshita consists of two connected rooms. A performer, referred to by the artist as the *Chief of Objects*, inhabits one of the rooms and manipulates the numerous objects Kinoshita put in both spaces. This installation is part of the collection of the Ghent Museum of Contemporary Art. To date it was only put up for display in close collaboration with the artist. Combining elements of a performance, a complex display of objects, and an interactive environment, *Voorstelling* challenges the museum in more than one way. This paper presents the co-operation that took place between the museum and the artist in order to allow the museum to deal with this work in the future, even without Kinoshita being present.

The goal was to develop guidelines and procedures for the future presentation of the work and its conservation – and when necessary the duplication and replacement of the installation and the objects. Although the aspect of randomness plays an important role in the performance, it was also necessary to create a performance-score for the *Chief of Objects*.

Being able to work together with the artist may seem to turn this research into a walk in the park, but quite a few out of the box, or rather, out of the conservation discipline solutions were needed to reach our goal. Putting neither the artist's nor the museum's interests in first place, but rather focusing on the artwork was one of the key elements. With this in mind both parties succeeded in securing *Voorstelling* for the future. We would like to put forward the methods and approach used in this research as solutions for the conservation of similar installations and for working together with contemporary artists.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The kinds of creative collaborations that conservators engage in come in many different forms. It is clear that the challenges we all encounter in our disciplines urge us to be both open-minded and creative. An example of such a challenge was the conservation of the installation artwork *Voorstelling* by the Japanese-Dutch artist Suchan Kinoshita, owned by the Ghent Museum of Contemporary Art (SMAK).

The research on *Voorstelling* was carried out within the framework of the project *Inside Installations*. This project ran from 2004 until 2007 and focused on, as the name suggests, installation art, and more specifically the preservation and re-installation of contemporary installation art. With the support of the European Community, this project was set up by six institutions that were all confronted with the same issues: how to deal with the conservation of installation art. The goal was to create guidelines for safeguarding installations for future generations, and to find solutions or methods for how to deal with this diverse art form. A thorough investigation was set up around topics such as documentation, preservation, artist participation, theory and semantics, and knowledge management and information exchange. These themes were incorporated into the research of several case studies on artworks owned by the participating museums and institutions.

Installation art is very diverse. This is confirmed by recent art history. The word installation has been used to describe art ranging from the early 'enhanced' paintings by Picasso, to Dadaist sculptures, to room-sized multimedia works by Allan Kaprow. In literature, one will find installation as a synonym for such diverse concepts as environment, assemblage, or in situ work.

It is relatively easy to agree on characteristics for categories such as painting or sculpture. Defining installation art would probably postpone lunch quite a bit. The easiest solution would be to come up with a negative definition: installation art is not painting and not sculpture.

This lack of definition is not necessarily a problem, but it is probably part of the reason why there are no conservators trained for the category of installation art. These artworks consist of new and unique combination of elements and materials. The fact that they have little common ground, and we rarely have “category knowledge” to fall back on, urges us to think outside the box and apply a bottom up approach in nearly all of the cases. This was clearly the case with Kinoshita's *Voorstelling*.

## 2. ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The installation artwork *Voorstelling* combines elements of a performance, a complex display of objects and an interactive display. It was made in 1997 for the exhibition *Entr'act 9* in Van Abbemuseum, in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Afterwards it was bought by SMAK, which showed this installation in its opening exhibition in 1999.

The installation is set up in a museum. It consists of a closed space that is divided into two equally large parts or rooms. Because of the way the installation is set up in the museum galleries, the visitors do not always immediately see the connection between the two rooms. In the wall between those rooms there is an opening – a window. Both rooms are open to the public through doors. In one of the two areas, wooden benches have been arranged, from which little program books have been hung. In Kinoshita's terminology this is the *Visitors Room*. The other room contains objects and is where the performer is found. Kinoshita refers to this performer as the *Chief of Objects*, hence the room is called the *Chief of Objects' Room*. During the performance the *Chief of Objects* interacts with the objects and controls light and sound devices. The performance was never carried out by the artist herself – she always looked for someone else to be her *Chief of Objects*.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Exterior view of the installation  
(Photograph by SMAK)



Fig. 2. The Visitors Room (Photograph by SMAK)

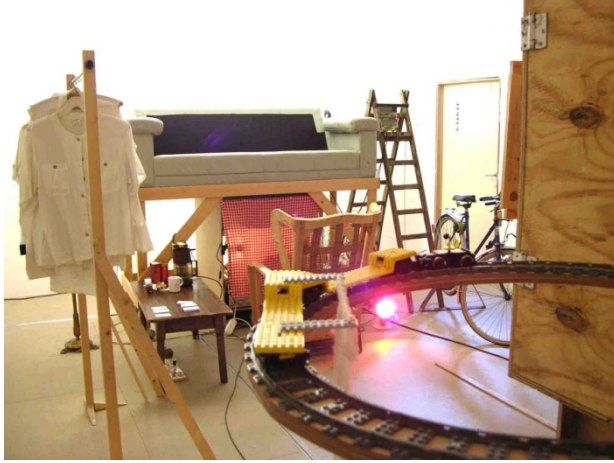


Fig. 3. Chief of Objects' Room  
(Photograph by SMAK)

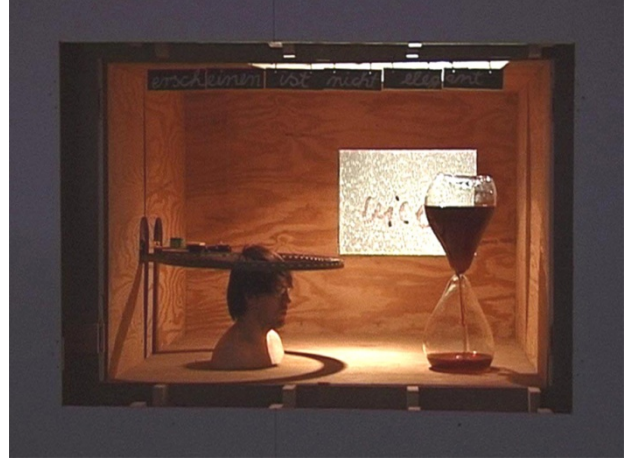


Fig. 4. The Chief of Objects  
(Photograph by SMAK)

The title of the work suggests a theater performance – the Dutch word *voorstelling* means performance. Elements of the installation – the benches, the curtains – strengthen this link. But in contrast to a theater performance, this work – and the performance within it – has no clear beginning or end, and the role of the audience (or ‘visitors’) remains undefined.

While the installation was acquired by the museum, staff was still heavily dependent on the artist to put it up for display. It was a close collaboration, but we needed to know how to deal with this artwork in the future, even without the artist being present.

The goal was to achieve guidelines for the future presentation of the work and the conservation of the installation. Three elements were researched: the space, the objects and the performance. This research took place in a ‘real life’ setting: *Voorstelling* was installed in the museum galleries during the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006. This setting gave us the possibility to investigate how to deal with the museum visitors. We had to know how to deal with them, their presence, and their interactions with the artwork. During the research it was important to keep in mind that the information and the knowledge we were about to gather was intended for different audiences: the museum in general, the conservation department, and the performer.

### 3. RESEARCH TOPICS

#### 3.1 SPACE

The first step in the re-installation process was the construction of the closed space, which contains the *Visitors Room* and the *Chief of Objects' Room*. At this stage, we already had close contact with the artist because we were wondering which of the previous set-ups was the best. The Van Abbe Museum had previously built the rooms, and the artist simply used the existing space to create her new artwork. For the artist, these two rooms functioned as two separate exhibition spaces and the public had to walk around through the museum to get to the other side.

In 1999, when SMAK first showed its new acquisition, they just copied the Van Abbe presentation: the same measurements were used to build the room. The biggest difference was that the space stood on its own in a large hall and did not connect with the museum architecture itself. Through interviewing Kinoshita, it became clear she did not like this isolated situation.



Through these talks it became clear for the first time that the artist thought it was important to relate to the architecture of the museum. Solutions for managing the given space with a view to future re-installations were collected. The instructions given by the artist for the re-installation of the rooms were followed closely in 2005. Existing museum walls were used and some new walls were built to complete the form.

The floor plan became smaller. This had consequences for the position of the objects in the rooms. Together with Kinoshita all objects were arranged and some of them in a slightly different way compared to two previous installations.

The space itself and the displays in the rooms were precisely documented through plans, photographs and a video registration. Construction materials used were listed. This documentation will help us with coming installations of *Voorstelling*: the creating of the space, the rooms, and the arrangement and position of the objects. The guidelines make it possible to adjust the layout to different measurements. This means the museum staff no longer has to copy older set-ups; through these guidelines they achieved more liberty.

### 3.2 OBJECTS

The objects, part of this installation artwork, are made from all kinds of materials, using different techniques. Some objects have particular visual and sound effects.

The use of all objects by the *Chief of Objects* during the performance has an influence on the preservation strategy. Objects can break down faster through this manipulation. Using the objects is crucial for the meaning of the artwork, so subjects such as duplication, reproduction, and restoration were discussed in conversation with Kinoshita.

All objects were catalogued. A description was made for every object, a photograph was taken, its condition was determined, it was measured and the position in the installation space was fixed. Some of the artwork's objects have specific light or sound characteristics. The light and sound levels were measured.

Together with the artist, preservation and presentation guidelines for every object have been established. Some objects could be replaced; others could be reproduced or restored. A few examples:

The coffee maker is a good example of replacement. Kinoshita bought this yellow-brown coffee maker in a second hand shop (fig. 5): for her it is important that objects carry a history.



Fig. 5. The coffee maker (Photograph by SMAK)

During the performance, the *Chief of Objects* makes actual coffee with this machine. It produces a particular rattling sound caused by calcification. If the old one must be replaced, the conservator would also have to make sure this characteristic is present because it has an important “sound” role in the performance. Because of the history aspect this coffee maker cannot be replaced with a brand new one.

The PUR curtain illustrates reproduction. This curtain consists of polyurethane sprayed in a certain pattern. During the performance it travels around the room hanging on a rail. From time to time, it bumps against another object or visitor, and it is not unusual for pieces to break off. Kinoshita explained and showed us how to make such curtains. Together with the artist an instructional video has been made. The tools for production are kept in the material archive of the conservation department.



Fig. 6. The PUR curtain in the installation (Photograph by SMAK)

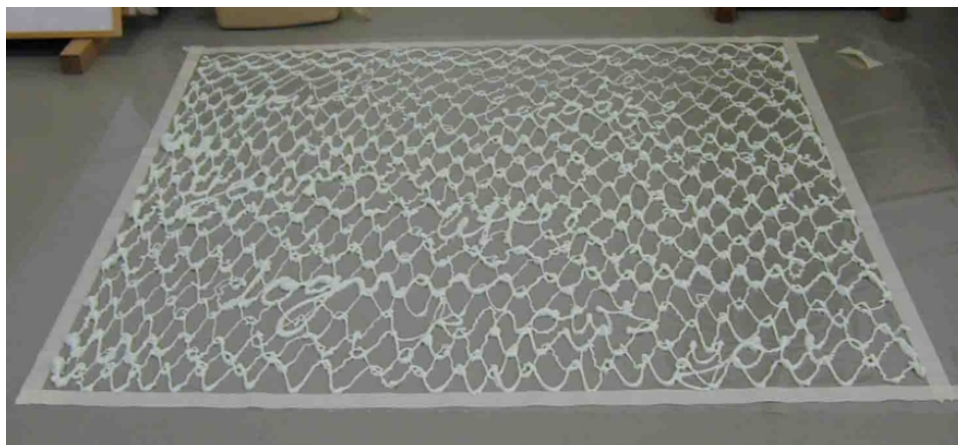


Fig. 7. The reproduction of the PUR curtain (Photograph by SMAK)

Some parts are so unique, restoration is still the answer. This is the case for the water-oil clock, an hourglass filled with salad-oil and water. This object, assembled by the artist, had been broken by a visitor during a previous exhibition. The two parts of glass are glued together with a reversible adhesive. The time mechanism can be reproduced by calculating the ratio of oil to water in the clock.



Fig. 8. The water-oil clock broken in two (Photograph by SMAK)



Fig. 9. The water-oil clock after restoration (Photograph by SMAK)



The role of the public also had an influence on the preservation strategy. There is an interaction allowed but only up to a certain level: visitors can walk around the two rooms. But as a visitor it is tempting to manipulate objects, certainly when you see the performer doing the same. Kinoshita allowed the visitors to sit on the benches, but objects in the *Chief of Objects' Room* could not be touched – only the *Chief of Objects* has permission. Guidelines were set up as to how the *Chief of Objects* should deal with this kind of visitor. He or she can point out that the objects are not to be moved, and the performer has the permission to secure things, when necessary.

### 3.3 PERFORMANCE

The performance is an important part of the artwork. Since the performance should be carried out by the *Chief of Objects* every time the artwork is on display, a thorough investigation was needed on how to deal with it.

Each time in the past, Kinoshita personally coached the *Chief of Objects*. In 1999 some notes about the performances were drawn up; this was called the “score.” However, the actions were not fully documented, there was lack of information, and the structure of the performance was unclear. This score was exposed in the artwork on a music stand.

It was obvious that the score was very limited and unclear without further explanation from the artist.

The first step of the solution was for the structure to be sorted out. An adaptable system was set up, keeping the opening hours of the museum in mind. This structure is adaptable, so when the artwork is exhibited in another museum they can adjust it to their opening hours.

Another difficulty was the role of randomness in the performance. According to the artist, the performance does not have a beginning or an end; an opening or closure. How should one interpret this, knowing the goal is to create something to enable the re-performances? The artist herself came up with the solution: the score was replaced by a card game. The cards are divided into the following themes: objects, light and sound. The *Chief of Objects* pulls a certain number of cards from these different groups and makes combinations. In this way the aspect of randomness is preserved: the chance of drawing exactly the same cards twice is very small. Each card displays one action that has to be carried out. The complexity and the richness of the performance were hereby preserved.

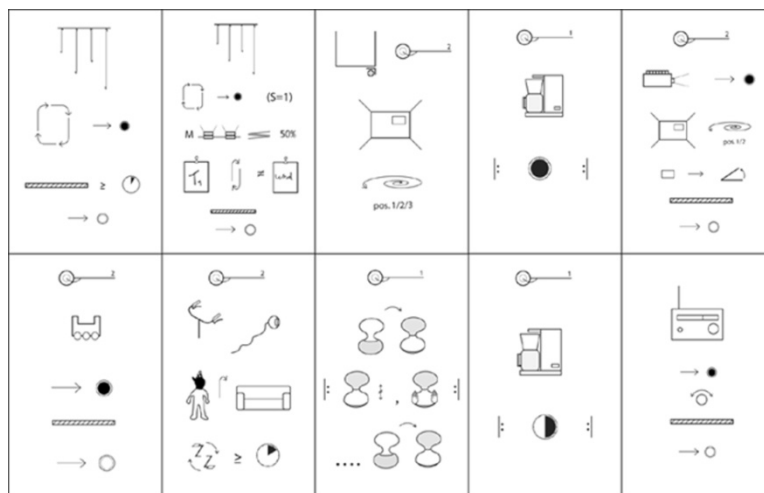


Fig. 10. The card game (Photograph by SMAK)

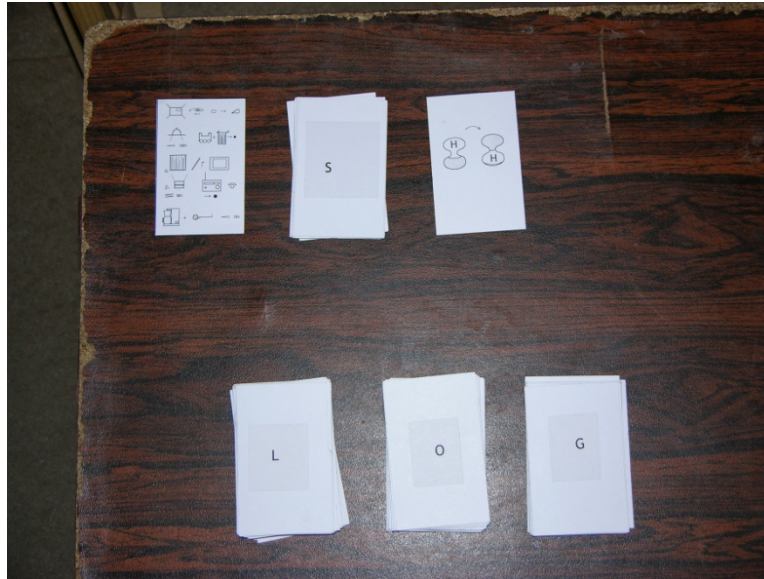


Fig. 11. The card game during the performance (Photograph by SMAK)

The scheduling and the card game were already big improvements, but we also needed information on how to carry out the different actions. By interviewing the artist, a lot of information on how to fulfill these actions has been gathered. She also showed us, in the installation itself, how to deal with certain aspects. These observations were very instructive. Furthermore, she taught the *Chief of Objects* how to manipulate objects in particular. The performer took a lot of notes. By then, he knew what the content of every action was. Based on this material he did several test runs. This way of working made it possible to find gaps in the information.

By this point, the performances had been documented with word and image. The knowledge and information about this artwork accumulated. The next step in the research process was to create a manual for the performance. The main objective was to create a reference document for the performer that listed all instructions and contained general guidelines. A vocabulary needed to be established: the artist had given specific names to objects such as *broad case*, *doll-beast*, etc. The manual had to have a low learning curve. Other requirements were that the manual had to be task oriented, it had to have a balance between general and detailed information, and it had to be easy to read. The manual should be modular, so it would be extendable in the future.

This document differs from the conservation file, in which everything is described in a rather technical way. The performance manual is more practical, focuses on the execution and is linked to the card game.

Traditional manual types were examined. A script or screenplay was not a suitable option. The performance has way too many actions and it is hard to deal with the aspect of randomness in a script. The instructional video is a good reference medium, but creating an instructional video was seen as impossible. Once again, it is hard to capture the aspect of randomness and recording all possible actions would be very time consuming.

The technical manual seemed the most suitable, and fit the proposed criteria. The difference between the performance manual and the usual technical manual lies in the goal. A technical manual has a clear goal, for instance: install your DVD-player and make it work. Our

manual for the performance does not have such clear objectives; it is more a listing and explanation of all possible actions.

To give you an idea of how the manual was constructed, we can look at its table of contents. It all starts with a general introduction - in this part we make the future performer aware of what the installation consists of. That is followed by the ‘Structure of the performance’ in which the play and still phases are explained. The third chapter discusses the card game, its function, types of cards and rules. The fourth chapter, ‘Actions,’ is the main part of the manual; for every object and its possible action, a chart with a description was made. This is followed by a rehearsal plan and the appendices. In these appendices, all cards of the game are listed and explained; it is excellent reference material and can be easy consulted when one has forgotten something.

As previously stated, a chart for every object and its action was made. All charts were made using the same template. This was based on the method called Information Mapping. Characteristic elements are: the title, the marked keywords, the use of limited amounts of text between lines, and the “step action table.” In this “step action table” every action is described in different steps, so it is easy to understand, to perform and to memorize.



<b>Honey clock</b>		<b>Symbol and floor plan</b>																	
<b>Description</b>	The honey clock is a large glass hourglass, filled with honey.																		
<b>Location</b>	The honey clock stands in the box; the exact position is marked with an 'x'.	<b>Photos</b>																	
<b>Action</b>	<p><b>Turning the honey clock</b> The honey clock is turned over at the beginning of every day that the museum is open for visitors.</p> <p><b>Preparation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All the honey is located in the lower section of the clock.</li> <li>- Slide the box into position three.</li> <li>- Put on the artslip gloves that are in the control box.</li> </ul> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Step</th> <th>Step-by-step procedure</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>Place both hands around the lower part of the clock – the part that is filled with honey.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>Slide the clock slowly toward yourself. Stop when the clock is just far enough over the edge of the box that you can take hold of it around the lower edge on the bottom. (See photo 2)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3</td> <td>Place your left hand underneath it, with your fingers around the bottom edge and your right hand on the back side of the lower part of the honey clock some ten centimeters under the middle.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4</td> <td>Lift the clock carefully.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>Carefully start a forward turning motion. In the meantime, keep raising the clock further so that as you turn it, it will not touch the box.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6</td> <td>Turn your left hand so that your fingers lie on the outer side of the clock and are able to bear the weight of the heavy section. (See photo 4)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>7</td> <td>Set the honey clock down only when the bottom of the clock is parallel with the bottom of the box. In this way you avoid putting stress on the middle section of the clock. (See photo 4)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p><b>Please note:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the middle, where the two halves are glued together, the clock is extremely vulnerable and can easily break.</li> <li>- Take care moving the box when the honey clock has just been turned. The honey is then located mainly in the upper half, and abrupt movements can cause pressure on the glued joint.</li> </ul>	Step	Step-by-step procedure	1	Place both hands around the lower part of the clock – the part that is filled with honey.	2	Slide the clock slowly toward yourself. Stop when the clock is just far enough over the edge of the box that you can take hold of it around the lower edge on the bottom. (See photo 2)	3	Place your left hand underneath it, with your fingers around the bottom edge and your right hand on the back side of the lower part of the honey clock some ten centimeters under the middle.	4	Lift the clock carefully.	5	Carefully start a forward turning motion. In the meantime, keep raising the clock further so that as you turn it, it will not touch the box.	6	Turn your left hand so that your fingers lie on the outer side of the clock and are able to bear the weight of the heavy section. (See photo 4)	7	Set the honey clock down only when the bottom of the clock is parallel with the bottom of the box. In this way you avoid putting stress on the middle section of the clock. (See photo 4)	 <p>1. The honey clock.      2. Take hold of the clock.</p> <p>3. Turn the clock over.      4. Put the clock down.</p>	
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Fig. 12. The technical manual, based on the Information Mapping method (Photograph by SMAK)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The collaboration between SMAK and the artist Suchan Kinoshita was very successful. As researchers of contemporary art, we sometimes have the opportunity to work together with the artist on the conservation of his or her artwork. This way we can glean information first hand. We can acquire a direct answer to specific questions concerning conservation and management aspects of an artwork. Not only do we have an opportunity to pose questions concerning the work of art, materials, techniques, and guidelines for display, but there is also the possibility of observing the creative process.

This case was selected knowing the willingness of the artist to cooperate. It is clear that without her cooperation, without the possibility of collaboration, it would be very hard to achieve

a satisfying result. But it is important to stress this was not a collaboration in the creation process, but rather a collaboration in the reconstruction of the creation process, so that we had a clear understanding of all aspects of the installation. It is not unimaginable that a collaborating artist would try to redo or update his or her work. This was not the case with Suchan Kinoshita; the historic dimension was clear to all involved. On the other hand, the distance in time between the creation and documentation can make it easier for the artist to take a more objective stance, if that is possible at all.

This kind of collaboration is not always easy. It is important you have clear goals from the start. For this case study, we wanted to be able to deal with this artwork in the future without Kinoshita being present. Both parties understood the importance. The artist and the museum kept the artwork *Voorstelling* as the main focus and this is how we succeeded.

If you have to work with an artist, take the following aspects into consideration: be well prepared, and do a lot of research in advance so you know what the artist's work is about. Otherwise these meetings will be very overwhelming and you will lose focus.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Suchan Kinoshita, Stijn Van De Vyver, Fabiana Cangià, Conservation Department SMAK.

## NOTE

1. The artist listed some selection criteria, which are included in the manual: "The *Chief of Objects* can be either a man or a woman. His or her age is not important. He or she preferably has a background in the artistic or cultural sciences, or in scenography. An artist can also take on the role. Actors do not fit the profile." The number of performers selected would depend on length of exhibition - on this no specifics are included in the manual.

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(accessed 01/01/2008).

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