

Where is the authenticity of the contemporary art?

Carlota Santabárbara Morera

Abstract: In the contemporary art, the conservation of the original matter is not as important as the conservation of the authenticity of the work, because of this it is very important to know the artist and his work, to be able to conserve the most important values. In this process it is very important the documentation and the research. Therefore the criteria of restoration has changed, we can not conserve the patina of the contemporary art as a historic document, if this means the loss of the aesthetic value of the work. Nowadays the art is different, and therefore its conservation is different too.

Key words: conservation, matter, image, Contemporary Art.

¿Dónde está la autenticidad del arte contemporáneo?

Resumen: En el arte contemporáneo la conservación de la materia original no es tan importante como la conservación de la autenticidad de la obra, por ello es muy importante conocer al artista y su creación para poder conservar los valores más importantes. En este proceso es muy importante la documentación y la investigación. Por lo tanto los criterios de restauración han cambiado, ya no podemos conservar la pátina del arte contemporáneo como documento histórico si esto significa la pérdida de valor estético de la obra. El arte de hoy en día es diferente y por lo tanto su conservación también.

Palabras clave: conservación, materia, imagen, Arte Contemporáneo.

Introduction

Nowadays artists give more importance to other artistic values, not so much to physical aspects but to abstract concepts such as the content, message, the experimental creative process or the form itself, the design.

At first sight, it is stunning the restoration of contemporary art since its historical proximity should avoid it. However, we are in front of works that have been highly damaged and deteriorated in the last years, due in most cases to experimentation in the creative processes, the using of industrial materials whose aging was unknown and, above all, to the artists' disdain for the material development of their works.

In front of contemporary artists' attitude, today's theory of restoration is based, largely, on the ideas of Cesare Brandi

(1906 Siena, 1988 Vignano). Art historian and restorer himself, he wrote *Theory of Restoration* (1963) where he summed up the basic ideas of his thought. For Brandi, restoration is defined as: "the methodological moment in which the work of art is appreciated in its material form and in its historic and aesthetic duality, with a view to transmitting it to the future" (Brandi, 1963).

From this definition it is understood that only the material the work of art is restored and this is prior in the restoration processes since it unites the historical and aesthetic instances. In the same way, Brandi holds that "the fact that the material may be the same is not enough to allow us to complete an unfinished or damaged building, because the historicity the material would acquire by means of the new use must not be taken backwards in time so as to avoid a historical as well as an aesthetic forgery from being created" (Brandi, 1963).

Today's theory of restoration is based on these ideas when stating that reintegration should be made with different materials to the original ones otherwise this new material apparently old should detract the historical value of the work of art.

In this way what Brandi does is to unify the two instances confronted throughout history, such as those defending the work of art as a historical document (Luca Beltrani) and those who consider it a merely aesthetic element (Viollet-le-Duc). Brandi defines every work as something unique and specific, naming it *Unicum*.

Discussion

The authenticity of the works of art was based on the matter in which it had been created because the work was identified with the finished physical object. But, nowadays it is different, the authenticity and the value of art is identified with many other values, especially when we are talking about digital art or new media (Adorno, 1975).

At this time, the matter does not matter as in the past, when the fetishism attitude towards the matter was because the authenticity of the piece identified with history of the matter, and was considered original for its uniqueness and exclusiveness.

Nowadays, this makes no sense because art has become immaterial Art forms, such as performance, installation, conceptual, digital and processual art. Then comes the rub: the need to rethink the theoretical foundations of the profession.

In many cases, Contemporary art is generated within technological contexts and its value has changed completely; it does not have a physical value anymore, it has become image, sensations and experiences. This is the case of the work Rain Room, (by random International, 2013), an installation of an electronic system that makes rain in a room, but with motion sensor that stop the rain over the person [figure 1].

To this respect we might point out the statements by the Italian theoretician and restorer Antonio Rava, who notes the fact that, in many cases, the artifact is not created by the artist's own hands, unlike conventional painting and sculpture, hence the necessity of new conservation practices which are still being under consideration nowadays, regarding the transmission of the artistic message to the future. And if, in order to transmit the original message, the substitution of elements is required, that would be a legitimate act as far as new information of the date of the change is provided.

The works of art today are created by a design and the artist does not make the work, it has been created based on a design that was generated by a software, the artist only decide how this should be done.



Figure 1.- *Rain Room* by Random International, 2013. Photo by the author.

This execution mode enables the creation of an object without "aura" (Walter Benjamin, 1936). The hand of the artist does no longer intervene in the process of making the piece of artwork, in this way, the piece are no longer "autographs"; then, the authenticity reside in the idea, the intention or the experience created, but does not reside on the original matter (Althöfer, 1985).

The change in the definition of art has brought about the change in the importance of art matter. Actually, art is a different kind of communication. It is no longer a formal representation of reality, but it goes further, it transmits, communicates, provokes and, above all, creates experiences.

In the German theories we find that Hiltrud Schinzel, 2003, talks about recuperating the "*Kunstwollen*" (the artistic willpower), which had been previously exposed by Alois Riegl (1858—1905), and that surpasses the critique restoration. In the same way Edmund Husserl (1859—1938) in his phenomenology theory brings us closer to the experience, emotion and sensations that art has to offer, aiming to recover the intention of art, and rescuing the sentiment, the thought and the willpower, and also differentiating between authenticity and originality.

For this reason, we must be conscious of the immateriality of art, and how we should conserve the most important for the artist, maybe the intention, the idea, the design or the experience. Different values that must be considered because art is changing.

The contemporary art approach must be different. It is necessary to work in an interdisciplinary way to research about the new symbolic meaning of the artwork.

This assertion directly affects the criteria of restoration, because the image is an end in itself, independently of its matter.

It is very important to see how the symbolic value of the matter acquires greater significance, over all in Povera Art and in Ready Made. For example, *One Space, Four Places*, created by Tony Cragg at 1982, at the same time of artistic movements like Povera art, Land Art, Minimal Art or conceptual art. The same characteristic of all of them was, that the artistic object crossed borders of the traditional sculpture like a material work made by the artist like stone, wood, or bronze, but they should be air, water, feathers or land.

Tony Cragg first began working with synthetic materials, and other industrial materials. *One Space, Four Places* (1982) is one of this creative process where he used new materials, not only because their physical characteristics but also because their metaphysics qualities. Tony Cragg talks about a "meaning balloon". According to the artist, the stone, the wood and the bronze have a set of meanings underlying which aroused a great deal of poetic connotation [figure 2].

One Space, Four Places is made up of a lot of objects, pieces of brick, cardboard, plastic shampoo bottles, a soccer ball, a cylinder type Campingaz, a can of Coca-Cola, sponges,..., all of this like a metaphor of degradation of the consumer

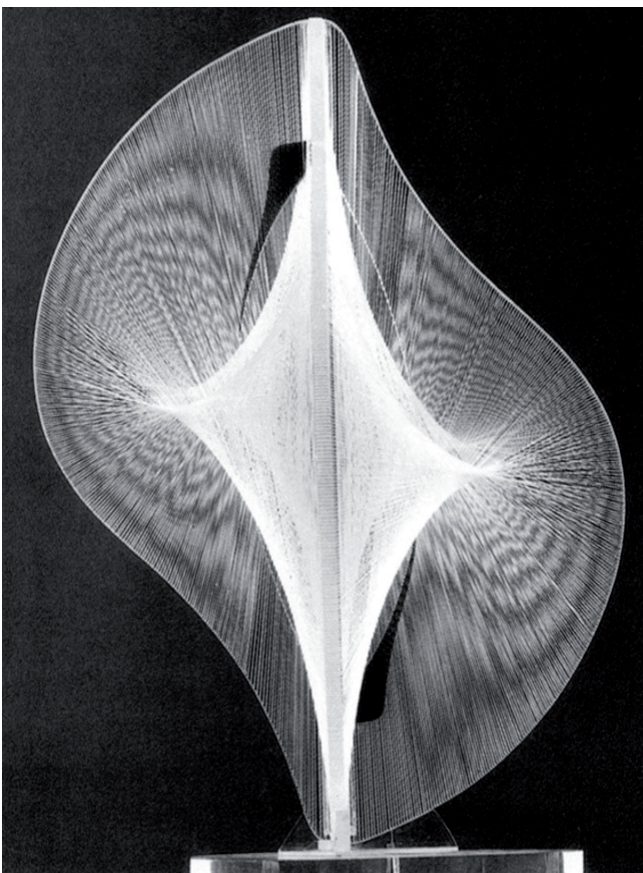


Figure 2.- *One Space, Four Places* by Naum Gabo. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/08/naum-gabo-and-the-quandaries-of-the-replica> (22-09-2016).

society. In other words the work was made like a protest against a toxic waste in the river means that if part of the work is lost and a replacement is needed, it is very important to keep in mind that Cragg found all of the materials in the banks of the Rhin river at the beginning of the 80s, and if we want to guarantee the authenticity of the piece, it's necessary to repair it with parts belonging to the same period of time.

But, if the matter loses importance in relation to the image, arises the discussion about what is the difference between an original work and its copy.

Another concern in contemporary art preservation is the early decay of the plastic elements. Such is the case of the work *Linear Construction in Space n°2* by Naum Gabo, in the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, which is made up of nylon threads that became yellowish and broke, which force restorers to substitute them for new ones, since they are industrial materials. But, in this case, as in many others, we should ask ourselves if the complete material renovation of the work would affect its originality, and if we might appreciate a work by Naum Gabo as a work from the late 40s or, on the contrary, a present replica. Perhaps its originality does not longer lie on the constituting material but on its design. Where was the authenticity of the work? Maybe it is most important the image than the material from which it is made (Aben, 1975).

We have quite grown accustomed to the copy, and the perception of it as authentic. Indeed, the original work is often replaced by a copy without people even noticing. Such is the case of the copy of the sculpture of Michelangelo's David, which stands in the center of the city of Florence, and tourists take a lot of photos of the sculpture thinking that it's the original work, but really it is a copy of the original, which is preserved in the Academy.

The image of the art work is what remains. We don't care about the historical value of the material. It is on this point that alternative theories and new contributions to the history of restoration, specifically in the restoration of contemporary art, must be quoted. Among them, Theory of the Project by Francesco Lo Savio, an artistic theory contemporary to Brandi's, who places the importance of art in the idea and not in the material creation. Lo Savio claims that "The artist assumed the project in itself as the most significant part of the artistic process, an original and decisive act in the artistic creation, which is why he assigns the realization to others. For him, the physical production does not count since the work is already completed as a project, before formulating the idea, with all numbers and measures necessary to its possible production" (Righi, 1992).

Above all, in case of manufactured works. In such cases, the value of the artist's intentions is very important, as well as the value of the original object as a carrier of its originality. In relation to this, many examples can be found to demonstrate the importance of the aesthetic appearance, like the Alexander Calder's works, which were created with specific colours. For this reason the loss of uniformity is a big problem for the right



Figure 3.- *Carmen* by Alexander Calder. MNCARS. Photo: <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/carmen> (22-09-2016).

perception of them. Such as the work *Carmen*, placed at Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, or others works, like the one in National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. in both cases the works were restored replacing the original paint by a new layer of paint [figure 3].

The original paint was not respected, but the authentic image was recuperated. The "Patina" of this type of sculpture has no sense, because the most important is the appearance like a new work. It is important to remark that the manufacturing of these works is industrialized. It is possible to say that it is not a restoration, but a reparation.

In reference to the question about the importance of the traces of time over the artistic matter, the Italian philosopher Massimo Carboni said that works of art in ancient times were conceived as an unchanging object, which needed to be preserved and restored. However, nowadays, the transitoriness and the ephemeral are more important as artistic concepts (Carboni, 2013).

Beyond the importance of the matter of contemporary art, the second question is in relation to the image of the art over time, and how to conserve the original aspect of the works. This is the case of the artwork *Corner of fat* of Joseph Beuys, a German artist that does a work with a corner of fat in a cardboard box. When the work was exhibited in the Stediljk museum at 1977, the fat was beginning to rot away and also give off a bad smell. For this reason the museum decided to replace the corner of fat by another material more stable. But the artist few years later said that this work had lost the authenticity and its value. When the museum decided to change the original material, the work lost the symbolic meaning of the materia. It is about the importance of the conceptual meaning of the material, beyond the appearance (IJsbrand H., et al., 1999).

In the other hand, Heidegger suggests how aesthetic quality of art has an interesting relation with the social role of art and its meaning. This is the cornerstone of

Heidegger's Theory of art. For this reason he considers the "Creative conservation" as the most important thing, which means that the conservation of heritage nowadays is the result of a creative process. That is possible only if Society makes a mental effort to understand the intention and memory of art. (Valentini, 2010:73)

In relation to the conservation of contemporary art, maybe we must admit that we have to conserve the change, like a methodology that also means dynamism in its own definition.

In that respect, we can talk about the work of Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (for David)* which was gathered by the Museum of Philadelphia at 1998. It was an installation of 302 fruit peelings like bananas, oranges, lemons and peaches. [figure 4]



Figure 4.- *Strange Fruit (for David)*. Photo: <https://imageobjecttext.com/tag/strange-fruit/>(22-09-2016).

Paula Cooper, her art dealer propose stop the deterioration, but the artist didn't want. Zoe Leonard had created this work like a process of degradation until disappear. For this reason the work was lost and only we can conserve the documentation of the process like a performance (Rotaeché González de Ubieta, 2011).

"Conserving the change is maybe the biggest challenge for the contemporary art restorers." (Schinzel, 1979).

Conclusions

Contemporary art gives priority to the idea over the material aspect of the work of art, which decisively conditions contemporary art's restoration, leading internationally-reckoned restoration criteria into crisis. Therefore in the restoration of contemporary art the material is admitted to be replaced, whereas in old art

there is a sacred-like respect for it. This obsession for the material is a concept inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism, historical movements which laid the basis of contemporary art collection and antiquarianism.

The conservation and restoration of the contemporary art is a change without an evident solution, despite the efforts, taken in that respect. What does exist, according to the German restorer Hiltrud Schnizel, is a methodology based on documentation, investigation and minimum intervention, aiming at the potential unity, but being aware that this does not longer lie in the physical object, but in the artist's idea or purpose (Santabárbara, in press).

Bibliography

ADORNO, T.W. (1975). *Teoría estética*, Turín, ed. Einaudi.

ALTHÖFER, H. (2003). *Restauración de pintura contemporánea, tendencias, materiales, técnica*. Madrid, Ed. Istmo.

BRANDI, C. (1963). *Teoría del Restauro*, Turín, Einaudi.

CARBONI, M. (2014). "Tutela, conservazione e restauro dell'arte contemporanea: l'orizzonte filosofico", en: *Tra memoria e oblio. Percorsi nella conservazione dell'arte contemporanea*, Roma, Lit Edizioni.

HERMAN ABEN, K. (1995). "Conservation of Modern Sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam". Pp. 105-109. From *Marble to Chocolate. The Conservation of Modern Sculpture*. Edited by Jackie Heuman. Tate Gallery Conference 18-20 September 1995. Achetype Publications Ltd.

IJSBRAND H., et al. (1999). *Modern art, Who Cares? The Foundation for the conservation of modern art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage*, Archetype Publications, Amsterdam.

RIGHI, L. (coor.) (1992). *Conservar el arte contemporáneo*, San Sebastián, Nerea.

ROTAECHE GONZÁLEZ DE UBIETA, M. (2011). *Conservación y restauración de materiales contemporáneos y nuevas tecnologías*. Editorial Síntesis. Madrid.

SANTABÁRBARA MORERA C. (In press) *Now days matter does not matter*. 5th International Conference Youth in Conservation of Cultural Heritage YOCOUCU. MNCARS. Madrid.

SCHINZEL, H. (1979). "Original and copy in the literature and memorial museum", ICOM (International comité of literature museums; ICLM), Düsseldorf, second annual meeting, ICOM.

TEMKIN, A. (1999). *Strange Fruit*. en: "Corzo, M.A, *Mortality immortality? The Getty conservation institute*. Los Angeles. pp. 45-50.



Carlota Santabárbara
carlotasantabarbara@gmail.com

BA in Art History and Management Postgraduate Cultural Institutions. Diploma in Conservation and Restoration. PhD in Art History about the Conservation of Contemporary Art. Currently I am professor of History of Art at University of Zaragoza.