

# SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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## 1. What is meant by conservation and restoration in contemporary art

The “Code” of cultural and environmental heritage states in Article 29, under the point on conservation that:

1. The conservation of cultural heritage is ensured by means of a coherent, co-ordinated and programmed activity of study, prevention, maintenance and restoration.
2. Prevention refers to a series of actions suitably carried out to limit situations of risk related to works of cultural heritage in their own context.
3. Maintenance refers to a series of actions and interventions to keep the condition of the work of cultural heritage under control and to maintain its integrity, functional efficiency and identity, inclusive of all its parts.
4. Restoration means the direct intervention on the work by using a set of operations aimed at maintaining its material integrity and the reclamation of the work itself, its protection and the transmission of its cultural value. In the case of buildings situated in zones declared at risk of earthquakes based on the legislation in force, restoration involves structural improvement [1].

Therefore conservation includes the study, prevention, maintenance and as far as it is relevant, the restoration of the cultural work.

It is more complex to define contemporary art by placing it in a determinate time period, rather than defining the actual concept.

When one speaks of contemporary art one refers to the artistic output of a certain period to the present day. Such time limits for some art historians go back to the beginning of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or to be more precise with the birth of the Impressionist Movement which the academic art world had started to question. Other experts consider works of art produced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be the time limit; and for others again it is the post Second World War period. These various interpretations do

not help in resolving the problem of conservation and restoration of works of contemporary art. Therefore, it is only right to search for an alternative way of classifying them.

## **2. It is not chronological classification that is required, but material**

The operation of conservation and restoration must be considered a critical action and it is precisely the interpretation of restoration as a “critical” action that Cesare Brandi’s “theory” is based on [2]: in his opinion, a view based on the recognition and respect for the work of art, both in its historicity and aesthetic values is affirmed.

Brandi states: “Restoration is the methodological moment of recognition of the work of art, both in its physical composition and in its aesthetic and historical bipolarity, before being transmitted into the future”.

Then:

“The physical composition of the work must necessarily have precedence, because it represents the physical place where the image was manifested. It ensures the transmission of the image into the future, thus guaranteeing its reception by the human conscience. So, if from the point of view of the recognition of the work of art as such, the artistic side has absolute pre-eminence, as long as this recognition is aimed at preserving the future of that possible revelation, physical composition becomes of primary importance”.

This leads to defining a limit for operations of reconstruction that wipe out any historical stratifications and consequently intensifying conservation based on “preventive” restoration. “Preventive” restoration is the result of Brandi’s conservative vision and includes all maintenance procedures able to limit degradation and thus avoid or postpone any restoration.

Brandi also indicates the aim of the intervention, emphasizing that “only the material with which the work of art is made, is restored [2].

On the basis of these affirmations, which are still shared today and found in many documents about conservation and restoration, chronological distinction ceases to be valid for contemporary works of art as it is not always clear. Therefore, it has been put aside in preference to a view which takes into consideration the material with which the “object” of contemporary art is made. It is clearly fundamental, then, to possess a knowledge of the materials used for artistic production, their characteristics and properties and their conservation environment. These operations are written in the *“Allegato D, Istruzioni per l’esecuzione di interventi di conservazione e restauro su opera a carattere plastico, pittorico, grafico e d’arte e di applicata della Carta della conservazione e del restauro degli oggetti d’arte e di cultura”* 1987, where even if there are no specific references to

artefacts mentioned in the present text, there are references that must be considered: "The first thing to do in any intervention on any work of art or historical is to make an accurate investigation of the state of conservation of the object itself and the environmental conditions in which it is kept. This examination includes verifying and as far as possible reconstructing historically, the climate and microclimate where the object was, and is kept. For this reason, the historical documentation of the data given by the instruments about changes in the temperature, pressure, hygrometry and also in the phototropism (curving of vegetable or even animal parts towards a light source) of the environment where it is kept, as well as those connected with the whole building (starting with the relative movement of the winds). The documents concerning the chemical composition of the atmosphere is obviously fundamental in identifying the source and the nature of any possible polluting elements. Finally, the information regarding the material composition of the environmental container (structures, coverings, furnishings, etc.), is also important. As for the condition of conservation intrinsic to the object, both the technical methods and materials used, must be checked, distinguishing between the original and spurious parts, or those which have been added, and roughly determining their respective dating. When possible an examination of the internal condition of the object should be carried out. This examination, in the first instance, is meant to be conclusive, but however should be corroborated, when possible, by further tests of a physical, chemical and numerical nature and must be carried out in close collaboration with experts of the various sectors and accurately recorded in the journal of restoration" [3].

Nevertheless, this view does not completely resolve the problems related to the conservation and restoration of contemporary works of art.

According to Heinz Althofer, one of the most reliable restorers of contemporary art: "Nowadays, it is not enough to be knowledgeable about materials and have a good command of restoration techniques to do a professional job. It is now necessary to delve deeply into the intellectual world and into the artist's philosophy; otherwise the starting point for the restoration would be wrong.

After all, the same materials and the same techniques have always been used to paint Madonnas, emperors and socialists: background, surface, colour, varnish, while the idea that dominates the representation has had little influence on the materials used. In present-day contemporary art, the materials themselves express artistic subjectivity. They are not simply theoretical considerations, similar for example to the question of neutral retouching or hatching, but conditions of great importance. If they are not taken into account, the work will not only be annihilated in its physical existence, but in its spiritual existence as well" [4].

In contemporary art, next to traditional techniques such as oil, tempera, fresco, and marble, bronze and wood sculptures, restoration has now become a standard practice. Artistic production today, makes use of non-conventional techniques: monochrome pictures, glossy or mirror-like surfaces, aggregates of different materials, smooth or porous, rigid or soft supports, installations, poor and perishable materials such as rusty iron, cardboard, straw, wax, dried leaves, just to give some examples used in the variegated and inexhaustible panorama of contemporary works [5].

Another type of artefact that must be considered is objects of Contemporary Design or “functional sculptures”: exclusive pieces of furniture or models reproduced in limited numbers, in materials borrowed from industrial manufacturing and considered to be, in the light of the latest quotations, works of art.

So, it follows that an interdisciplinary approach to the operation of restoration must necessarily involve experts from different sectors, with experience both of a historical-artistic and technical character. This, if necessary must include the artist himself, if living, otherwise the institutions in charge of maintaining and handing down his memory to posterity. In this way, there is a complete vision of the techniques and materials used. Of greater importance, with respect to works produced using traditional techniques, is the knowledge of new materials (plastic materials, synthetic and semi-synthetic polymeric materials such as painting binders, acrylic colours, etc.). This knowledge must be used in collaboration with the manufacturers and research done on compatibility and curability, using artificial aging techniques when there is no reliable way of checking on the said materials from past experience and history [6-11].

### **3. Is it right to intervene on a contemporary work of art?**

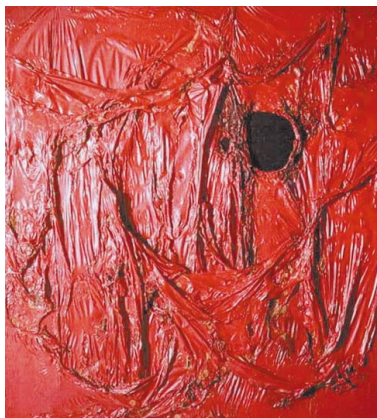
Once the extent of the intervention has been assessed and the methodological approach to the conservation and restoration has been established, it is advisable to set down the specific problems to be faced for contemporary art.

Works of art produced in the nineteen-hundreds have started a debate about the concept of “durability”, that is the time it takes for the work of art to transmit to our times and to our perception, the idea of eternity, which classical art has handed down to us, together with the model of conservative intervention. The artist who worked following a traditional path had detailed knowledge of the materials he used. Artistic techniques developed slowly through the centuries and were defined by the schools and studios. Their evolution was affected only by rare events caused by commercial aspects connected for example, to a new pigment or a new resin introduced from the East. It was the artist him-

self and the assistants in his studio who prepared the colours. The “studio secrets” were only minor variations or a particular aspect of a practice exercised following the rules of the art world, which had codes of its own and knew exactly what the concept of durability was.

From this point of view the relationship with contemporary art becomes problematic: the vocation for the ephemeral can manifest itself as the adoption of perishable materials. Restoration identifies, in an antique work of art, abrasions, “cretature”, changes in colour, burns as unmistakable signs of alteration. Now, on the contrary, one must come face to face with the use of a material, which is already worn or which in some cases is deteriorated, because it is part of the desired effect (fig. 1-5) [5].

In these cases a conservative approach is not always the right one: trying to keep the original materials, even if they are degraded, a condition deliberately desired by the authors, can cause the loss of that aesthetic instance which is fundamental to the work of art and does not consent direct enjoyment of the work (referring to the possibility of freezing some works, in particular those by Roth).



*Figura 1. Alberto Burri, Big Red P18, 1964, Rome, National Gallery of Modern Art [12].*



*Figura 2. Alberto Burri, Big wood G59, 1959, wood, acrylic and combustion on canvas, 200 × 185 cm, Rome, National Gallery of Modern Art [12].*



*Figura 3. Alberto Burri, Sack and red, 1954, sack and oil on canvas, 86 × 100 cm, London, Tate Gallery [13].*



Figure 4. Lucio Fontana, *Spatial concept*, 1960, 116 × 90 cm, Trento and Rovereto Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art [14].



Figura 5. Lucio Fontana, *Awaited spatial concept*, 1963, waterpainting on canvas, 60 × 46 cm, Private collection [15].

Duchamp's ready-made, for example, are works born from the manipulation of industrial objects extrapolated from daily life and placed in an art context. The replica of a ready-made using the same materials transmits the same message as the original. This is an essential point also due to the consequences seen from a conservative point of view, because it introduces the controversial theme of the "identity" of the work in connection with its reproducibility. Can the work be allowed to be substituted, wholly or in part for conservation reasons, without losing its significance?

In the case of works with a predominantly conceptual value, possessing an independent identity with respect to the object itself, as in works made up of an assemblage of materials from industrial manufacturing and which, having deteriorated parts, interferes with the use and the functionality of the work, the substitution of parts is acceptable even to the extent of replacing the model entirely, preserving the originals, restored for purposes of documentation.

This kind of operation defends the artistic message and thus, the identity of the work at the expense of the originality of the materials. The problem in such cases consists in the difficulty of procuring spare parts if as often happens, they are no longer produced. The same applies to works of Kinetic art or Video Art made from motors, mechanical and electronic devices and monitors, when replacements are needed for some parts which no longer function or are irreparable.

In this case too, the same materials chosen by the artist should be used. However, if after some

years, many products are no longer produced and so become unavailable, the possibility of replacing them with similar, but more stable products can be considered.

Another important challenge for Conservation is connected to “ephemeral” art: happenings, Land-Art, performance, temporary installations, whose memory is entrusted exclusively to films or photographs.

The extraordinary condition of being untransportable, jeopardizes the age-old custom of keeping works in museums and changes the mechanism for commercially promoting and diffusing works.

In addition keeping the memory of this kind of art alive represents a challenge for conservation due to the impossibility of restoring it.

The only desirable attitude to take is that of making a carefully detailed document of the event and of course the conservation of the supporting equipment which reproduces it. The concern that such supports are not adequately preserved is manifested in Michele Cordaro's statement: “...show that such a kind of documentation about recent artistic experiences, when the object is absent does not prolong the life of the event very much. It certainly does not ensure periods of time long enough to consent at least the historicization of the event and for it to be put into perspective, on a scale of relations and values within the period of time which produced it. Finally, one has to consider that the use of such supports is, in trends which are anything but unimportant for contemporary artistic experience, a direct undertaking and a determined choice. This is the case in artists' films or in videos, often made using amateur instruments or in the widespread use of photographic media in illustrated compositions, where even devices for the immediate developing and printing of the Polaroid camera kind are used. The same happens in the sector of Computer Art and electronic image elaboration. Here the problem is how to preserve both the support on which the work is impressed (photograph, film, videotape, CD, DVD, etc.) and the system for reading these supports linked to industrial manufacturing, which changes with time and evolves.

Another trend reminiscent of the ephemeral is the so-called Eat Art, which designs the metamorphosis of the work the spectator sees using foods (chocolate, sugar, bread...). These materials, placed inside a showcase are devoured by insects and micro-organisms: the event consists in the fact that the material progressively changes its shape.

In this case, it is not possible to think of intervening to prevent deterioration, because it would involve the non-realisation of the work. The task of conservation starts with the study of the manufacturing characteristics and deterioration of the chosen material to identify the best environmental conditions to preserve it, establish the most suitable cleaning method and the most efficient way of eliminating the insects.



Another hypothesis for conservation which has been accepted, foresees the freezing of the work which would mean avoiding the disinfection treatment and therefore the use of dangerous products from a hygienic-sanitary point of view. The smallest intervention on the other hand could safeguard the simple “perception” of edibility of the material with which it is made without the use of invasive methods [16].

In this brief examination, examples of the various forms of contemporary art have been proposed to give an idea about the different kinds of support and about the difficulty of intervention. On the other hand, the substitution of materials with others of the same kind or longer-lasting, can involve the loss of its historical appeal. The abandonment of the representation, the adoption of an everyday object and/or a technological element, crossing the confines of “creating art” in the registration of art-events tied to the moment of their happening, all lay down the conditions for a restoration which is the seeking of an intention rather than a hypothesis on the state of the material.

It can be deduced then, that there cannot be a standard procedure of intervention for contemporary works of art – which, in any case, could only be implemented with great difficulty in such a vast and varied field – however, there could be a methodology which has as its basis a detailed study of the materials employed and of the philosophy which is at the basis of their use.

#### **4. Who must intervene?**

The answer to this question can seem banal. The work must be done by restorers with experience gained in the right institutions such as universities, ICR and OPD, on the basis of in-depth studying of historical-artistic-matter subjects and diagnostic tests to assess the material consistency, the state of conservation and the environmental location of the works of art. However, for contemporary art, there is a particular problem as the inventor and author of the work of art is in most cases, living. Is it right to ask the artist if he knows the philosophy behind its realization, the materials and techniques used to create it, to intervene on his own work?

In this respect, it is evident that intervening on his own deteriorated work, the artist could modify it conceptually and materially in light of an artistic career in which he has had a leading role through the years. Such an intervention, would lead to the creation of another work, resulting in a contemporaneous falsification of the pre-existing one: becoming a work of art (following Brandi’s definition) and a part of cultural heritage (having acquired a value for the civilisation which produced it). It is also true that the possibility of being able to collaborate with the living artist represents a great opportu-



nity for the restorer. By asking the right questions relative both to the aesthetics, which is the basis for the creative path being followed to achieve the end result, and to the materials and techniques used, he can come to an agreement based on his own technical knowledge, about the choices necessary to achieve the best way of restoring the work.

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## Summary

A number of aspects and problems are discussed which refer to conservation and restoration in contemporary art. The need to classify contemporary art objects not chronologically but materially is

obvious, which as well as using traditional techniques utilize new materials made available by industrial research. Thus the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the problem, not only involving the experts, who have the historical-artistic and technical expertise, but the authors of the works in question too (and the manufacturers of the constituent materials of the said works), in order to be able to have a complete informative view of the corresponding characteristics and properties.

### **Riassunto**

Vengono discussi alcuni aspetti e problematiche che si riferiscono alla conservazione e al restauro nell'arte contemporanea. Si fa presente l'esigenza di una classificazione non cronologica bensì materica degli oggetti d'arte contemporanea che, oltre ad avvalersi di tecniche tradizionali, utilizzano nuovi materiali resi disponibili dalla ricerca industriale. Di qui l'importanza di un approccio interdisciplinare al problema, che coinvolga non solo esperti con competenze di carattere sia storico-artistico che tecnico ma anche gli autori delle opere in questione (nonché le case produttrici dei materiali costituenti le opere stesse), allo scopo di poter disporre così di un quadro informativo completo sulle corrispondenti caratteristiche e proprietà.

### **Résumé**

On discute certains aspects et problématiques qui se réfèrent à la conservation et à la restauration dans l'art contemporain. On fait remarquer l'exigence d'une classification non chronologique mais matérielle des objets d'art contemporain qui, outre à se servir de techniques traditionnelles, utilisent des nouveaux matériaux rendus disponibles par la recherche industrielle. D'ici l'importance d'une approche interdisciplinaire au problème, qui implique non seulement des experts avec des compétences de caractère tant historico-artistique que technique mais aussi les auteurs des oeuvres en question (ainsi que les maisons de production des matériaux constituant les oeuvres mêmes), dans le but de pouvoir disposer ainsi d'un cadre d'information complet sur les caractéristiques et propriétés correspondantes.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Es werden einige Aspekte und Schwierigkeiten im Zusammenhang mit der Erhaltung und der Restaurierung in der zeitgenössischen Kunst in Betracht gezogen. Dabei wird auf die Notwendigkeit nicht von einer chronologischen sondern von einer materiellen Klassifizierung von Gegenständen in der zeitgenössischen Kunst hingewiesen, solche Klassifizierung soll sich auf traditionellen Techniken stützen aber sie muss auch neue Materialien aus der Industrieforschung verwenden. Daher ist ein interdisziplinärer Ansatz zum Problem von wesentlicher Bedeutung, der nicht nur Experte mit historischen-künstlichen oder technischen Kompetenzen mit einbezieht, sondern auch die Autoren der Werke (und die Produktionsgesellschaften der Materialien, aus denen die Werke bestehen). Auf diese Art und Weise kann man eine vollständige Übersicht über die Eigenschaften der Werke haben.

### **Resumen**

Se comentan algunos aspectos y problemáticas en relación con la conservación y restauración en el arte contemporáneo. Hay que notar la necesidad de una clasificación, no cronológica sino material, de los objetos de arte contemporáneo que, además de recurrir a técnicas tradicionales, utilizan los nuevos materiales que la investigación industrial pone a disposición. De ahí la importancia de un enfoque interdisciplinar del problema, que implique no sólo a los expertos con competencias de carácter tanto histórico-artísticas como técnicas, sino también a los autores de las obras de que se trate (así como a las casas fabricantes de los materiales que constituyen las obras), a fin de poder contar así con un cuadro informativo completo acerca de las características y propiedades correspondientes.

## Резюме

В статье обсуждаются некоторые аспекты и проблемы, затрагивающие сохранение и реставрацию произведений современного искусства. Акцент делается на необходимости классификации не хронологической, но материальной, объектов современного искусства, при создании которых используются традиционные технологии, а также новые материалы, полученные в ходе исследований в промышленном секторе. В связи с этим предлагается новый междисциплинарный подход к данной проблеме, который вовлечет не только экспертов в историко-художественной области, но также в технической сфере, и с их второв произведений (также фабрики, производящие материалы, используемые в произведениях). Все это необходимо для создания полной информационной картины соответствующих характеристик и качеств произведений.

