

Contemporary Art, its Conservation and Neo-Liberal Structures

A comparison of contemporary art's characteristics and the problems of its conservation with economic structures and their management

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Abstract:

Phenomena of contemporary art are noted, which show its concern with contemporary economics. In this context emotional parallels between restoration-problems and those of the stock-exchange are revealed and some differences of these characteristics to the attitudes of many streams in contemporary art as f.i. conceptual art, process-art, installation art etc. respectively artists producing this kind of art-styles, are analysed.

Keywords:

Contemporary art, economics, stock market, risk management, conservation/restoration

Preamble:

We live in a dynamic world. Ever changing circumstances have in consequence a longing for stability. Stability however is attached to static entities. One static entity is the historical artefact. The history of its culture for almost any civilization and in any time has been a consoling pride and the material relicts of culture therefore have been treated as precious treasures. Because of this fact the professionalizing of persons caring for cultural relicts slowly could develop and in due course this field of work has been named conservation/restoration. In a way this profession was and is quasi a guarantee for stability. In consequence restorers mostly are considerate and reliable persons, whose attachment to responsibility and ethics in general has to be much greater than in many other professions.

Shock by modernist ideas

Modern and contemporary art shocked not only the public and the non-producing art-world, it also undermined theories of its conservation. New problems, however, initiated self-reflection in conservation business and made conservators realize that inter-disciplinary cooperation is a must in the profession. Cooperation of well-known research fields is in a way traditional – or historical – because they have already developed methods over a more or less long time. Contemporary art on the contrary is rather innovative, oriented on the future, respectively sensitive for forthcoming cultural trends, which it might 'foresee', even if it picks up tradition and quotes like e.g. postmodernist works do.

Links to economy – a new approach to some phenomena of contemporary art

Therefore the idea dropped into my mind to compare contemporary art and its conservation to a very topical and rather new field of interest which plays an important part in art distribution as well as artistic concepts, namely economics and here precisely the stock market¹. References and links to our economic environment are not new in art. One out of many examples is Jon Shelton, a young American artist, who called his poetic website www.oscitantenterprises.com. This is quite understandable, as the artist, in a world of functionalism and efficiency, not only wants to reflect this given, but also has to sell a product. This product, however, lacks usefulness, at least at first sight, but nevertheless is able

to produce many, diverse and intense emotions. Therefore the reflections below will be concerned with emotions, time-bound aspects and theoretical bases of professional problems by comparing the entities stock-exchange, contemporary art production and conservation of contemporary art.

General similarities

The share-holder shares his holds with many other persons. Insofar he is comparable to artist, spectator and conservator in any kind of participation or interactive art. This is typical for a democratic constellation, which implies mutual non-hierarchic relations of its members as a matter of course. Stock-market, new art-forms open for cooperation and conservation also share being oriented on the future to an important degree. Consequently there exist a lot of related and comparable emotional entities and emotional experiences such as hopeful expectations and fear of risks. Another link is the fast speed of developments on the stock-market and in interactive art, which may be promoted by computer technology.

Dualism hope – fear

Implicit in the view on the future for the man of the present are mainly two emotions namely hope and fear. The shareholder both hopes to gain money and fears to lose it by his/her actions or non-actions. In conservation there is the same emotional ambivalence in view of the future: hope for the stability of one's considerations and their consequences documented in methods and decisions in practical work and the fear that they may turn out to be misleading. These emotions are very strong, due to the often high market value and risks imminent in conservation practice.

The subject – object dilemma

Dualism of traditional art-object and subjective 'art in evolution'

The artist's links to the future, personal aspects excluded, are wider and he/she seems to be more courageous than average man. This may be demonstrated by installation art, and here I may quote the artist Kinochitaⁱⁱ who wants her work to be given place to develop, because after finishing, she would feel like a spectator, no more like an artist. In analogy to language 'you have to reformulate all the time' she claimed. According to this statement the artist's hope is continuity of dynamic development (which might perhaps be a new contemporary form of stabilityⁱⁱⁱ) and her fear is to be pressed into getting immovable respectively static by partners like for instance a museum. This view of a future taking into account the flow of time in my view is nearer to reality and less speculative than the hopes of both shareholder and restorer, as time is fluent and stands in opposition to the conservator's and his client's longing for a static stability.

In this context Kinochita said that her work, if it were finished, would mutate from a process into an object. It is obvious that conservators up to now treated artworks as objects and that art before the industrial evolution evidently was more structured to satisfy the longing for an imagined stability. Here contemporary art forces us to reconsider our view of art in general. This attitude to treat the artwork as an object is linked to scientific analyses and generally the methods of sciences. Subjective contemporary art does not want to be treated like a 'dead' thing, which an object in the view of the installation artist by definition must be. It is evident that the meaning of the word 'conservation' itself includes a static which might be misleading for our attempt to save these art-forms.

In the stock-market world, the market itself, more than the individual shareholder has to hope for movement in time, without movement it could not exist, therefore the market in a

way is analogue to these contemporary art forms, which in the following, to distinguish them from traditional art-objects, will be called 'art in evolution'. The emotions of the buyer/seller, however, are ambivalent, in case he wins he wants to continue, which means hope for a future development is present and investment is risked, in case he loses he generally wants to stop by selling the shares, in this case fear leads to the well-known urge for static stability^{iv}. The share-holders emotions evidently are nearer to the restorer's than to the artist, although the restorer works not exclusively for his own interests.

This demonstrates too that the personality of the artist in this comparison is more complex than restorer and shareholder. He/she is linked to the entities which are the basis for art-production as well as stock-market like raw materials, industry/technology or whatever. Without the stock exchange, respectively the artist, stock- and art- material stays static, however with the potential to be dynamized at any time.

In this context the traditional artwork in a museum might resemble a share or firm being taken from the stock-exchange, but not because of the firm being bankrupt. If there still exist any material or intellectual remains, an artwork having been conceived as object or shifted into becoming one, still can arouse emotions in the spectator. These emotions, however, are interactive to a lesser degree than is the case with a work in continuous development like an installation. Because of this the spectator in general is not so much involved personally and consequently emotionally. This may lead him to the illusion of having in view an entity which is stable and consoling. His role in this case then is more that of a consumer than someone participating, he takes not risk, but profits only.

A lot of contemporary 'art in evolution', paradigms are installations, because of the great stress on the works by continuous change of place and material, has to be conserved at the same time as it is produced. There are differences between the two professions artist and restorer, however. How can one do justice to the truth of the artwork and, simultaneously, the truth of experiences it may provide? This task cannot be coped with, if truth is regarded as a stable entity, we have to take into account the flux of time in order to be able to proceed.

Here too a comparison to the stock-exchange might be permitted. The movements of the stock-exchange are based on the development of the sold and bought products. The buyer anticipates a future development of the product, which he chooses to buy, according to these anticipations. His behaviour influences the stock, whose movements are reactions to the buying and selling attitudes of shareholders, who actually behave like fortune-tellers. Sometimes incidentally, but if a multitude of shareholders think the same about the future very often, the market gets influenced and acts according to these common imaginations, although there might be no stable basis for such expectations. This paradox situation might be called self-fulfilling prophecy, still it works in reality.

In installation art the same phenomenon can be noticed. The more movement respectively development the artist allows his work to have, the more interaction and activity there comes from the public in a kind of accumulating effect. Therefore the development of a work seems to be even more arbitrary and consequently less transparent by this geometric progression and Kinoshita's sentence^v: 'it is not either or with installation art for solutions' (sic) is very true.

'Artistic intention' and 'ideal experience'

In traditional art historical research one tries to respect the 'intention of the artist' and to define the so-called 'ideal experience' of an art-work. Still, if the aim is diversity of composition and perception, something as one-sided as primary artistic intention, in the best case can be one side of a Janus-head. The same is the case with the dual system development

in time and the static of a wished for ideal experience. More than a dialectic relationship between both is not possible. In science, of course, one is inclined to keep to one's proved and seemingly stable theories, and rather accept to fail with them, because any change includes a basic alteration of methods and seems to raise the risk of failing.

Risk management

In the stock-exchange the shareholder wants to reduce his risk too, although the highest profit automatically demands the highest risk. As far as I know there are three methods for risk-reduction:

1. analyses
 2. consultation of experts
 3. instinct
1. The principle of analyses is to research the past and make analogies to the future. Historical facts however are static and the future is dynamic, therefore they are not compatible. From the past we may learn about historical givens including errors, but this does not prevent new errors in the future and/or the old ones in disguise.
 2. To rely on so-called consultants, who combine analyses with experience and perhaps instinct is no solution either. The risk always remains at the part of the acting person, in this case the share-holder, anyway.
 3. To rely on one's subjective instincts, experiences, intuition, emotions etc. can be compared to the player in a casino. This method is arbitrary, but proclaimed to have the same percentage of positive result as the first mentioned analytical one^{vi}.

All three methods do not seem to be reliable enough to be adapted for conservation:

1. The analytical method resembles the traditional conservation practice in which the artwork is treated as an object. This traditional procedure is not fitting for contemporary work
2. Relying on the expert means relying on the methods of different research disciplines, which accompany our work. In the end the conservator, being the person who acts, has to take the full risk.
3. To act on instinct is an ethical taboo since the introduction of scientifically based methods into conservation and would question the seriousness of conservation work in our science oriented times. It seems to be a fact, however, that scientific research is taken into critical regard in the last years and there is a shift from historical thinking to aesthetic one. In this context I quote the artist Kinoshita 'my view of history: not to be cautious to be objective'.

Death or vivisection ?

In conservation the topic of dying of an object came into discussion lately in connection with contemporary art^{vii} due to the fact, that problems up to now could not be solved. It corresponds to the thought of Kinoshita that a work in evolution becomes an object, if the process of change, which may be called its 'life', has ended. In the stock-market death is an unfortunate but usual happening. After bankruptcy a firm or whatsoever may vanish and consequently might be called dead.

For an artwork the declaration of death is not that simple. To correspond to a human body-soul-relation, a synthesis of material/technique/medium and content has to be defined, yet in general and for contemporary art especially, this cannot be a static entity. Furthermore, depending on its components, the material of the work as such remains the same to a certain degree and a work's historical value is always present anyway, although its contents might change according to different interpretations. The aesthetic value is even more dynamic or instable. Stable criteria whether and from which point on aesthetics might vanish or die have

not yet been found out. It might be doubted whether a time-defined declaration of death of an artefact is possible.

There might be a point, however, when a time-bound work vanishes materially due to instability of material and/or technique, but nevertheless is present still in documentation.

It also happens that works in the view of its creator are 'dead' and, if the artist wishes, they might be destroyed. This will, based on copyright, and exact point of time of its declaration should be documented in writing.

It is more difficult, however, to call art-works dead as long as they still stay in a public place like a museum and/or are officially documented, even if it were in memory only^{viii}. This being in some way accessible conserves so to speak their potential of emotional experience, although for the artist him/herself they might resemble a corpse in a deep-freeze or a mummy, just as irksome as his picture must have been for Dorian Gray. It is fairly probable that after a not definable period of time a 'living art-work' will shift into a traditional art-object, whose home is the museum or other collection. Perhaps the status of a 'work in evolution' can, exaggeratedly formulated, be called 'active life of aesthetics' – aesthetics then meaning sense-experience exclusively^{ix} - and without movement 'passive life in history. During an active state, spectators can share life with the artwork as society did with the person Dorian Gray. A passive state (i.e. Gray's picture), of course, makes a work much more accessible to the grip, including misuse, of a consumer-spectator and/or scientist-restorer than an active one.

Static dualism or dynamic synthesis ?

If we divide the art work into these extreme dual positions, the solution is simple. The passive work could find its conservation methods in relation to traditional ethics. For the active work guidelines still have to be found. Yet it may be doubted whether problem-solving can be found in an either or constellation, as already the artist Kinochita stated. It is much more probable and to be desired that new and less rigid methods, hopefully to be found for active art, influence and reanimate those used for passive art and at least a theoretical synthesis might be found

Turning back to the general thoughts at the beginning, where the profession of conservation was analyzed as being an emotional stabilizer and comforter for man by conserving desired stability, seemingly inherent in cultural artefacts, one may conclude: There is no consolation in the present, because the present is fluent. An illusion of consolation might be found in the past and is necessary for man's wellbeing. This fact makes restoration a requirement. There will always be hope for as well as fear of the future, however, and this fact, after all, has turned out to remain stable. This is not so bad, as one may assume, for a predictable and stabilized future would be extremely boring.

ⁱ Comparisons to the art market are not intended. Evident parallels like pushing a product by collaboration of interested parties like museums, dealers, private investors etc. are not the theme.

ⁱⁱ quotation from her contribution in the seminary installation art May 11th at Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht

ⁱⁱⁱ see the central concept of *Rizome* in the writings of Gilles Deleuze

^{iv} Of course the sophisticated share-holder acts differently, here only a general attitude can be compared.

^v quoted from the round table at Maastricht

^{vi} see *Aktien & Co (shares & co)* Stiftung Warentest, Finanztest, Berlin 2004

^{vii} Alison Bracker's research, interdisciplinary symposium *Wann stirbt ein Kunstwerk? (When does and artwork die?)* in Stuttgart, Academy Schloss Solitude, February 2007

^{viii} See the author's essay *The Problems of Aging*, preprints ICOM-CC Ottawa 1981, 81/11/4 reprinted in *Touching Vision* Brussels 2004. To artistic documentation in memory see artist Tino Seghal, named and discussed by Pip Laurenson at the Maastricht conference.

^{ix} This attitude comes from old Greek Aesthesis and can be traced up to Baumgarten and Kant.