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Some Theory for the Conservation of Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes different ontological categories and how they relate to the conservation of contemporary art. Faced with the necessity of apprehending the work of art from an ontological point of view, a theoretical approach is made on the concepts that most affect the conservation of contemporary art: quiddity, truth-authenticity, identity, quality, consistency, and interpretation. These are analyzed from an empirical perspective, based on the experience of conservation and restoration. Since conserving and restoring require making decisions that will affect the material and conceptual plane of the works, several possible paradigms that must be introduced into the deontological code of the profession are analyzed. In addition, the study of a new paradigm is provided, that of the death of the work of art. This paradigm can serve as a frame of reference, given the impossibility of bringing the 'Truth' of the artwork into the world of the sensitive. This may occur due to different conditioning factors and limitations of a material, technical, or intentional type, which affect issues that were once established as essential to the entity. On the other hand, different types of time that are related to the conservation of contemporary art are studied: biological time, the eternal present of the work, time as a constructor agent, and destructive time as a facilitator of the appearance of ruin or ruin-relic in the work of art.

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Introduction

Consideration of writing an article that addresses the current state of contemporary art conservation theory is a challenge and an almost unattainable objective. Therefore, the inclusion of the word 'Some' in the title of the article gives us some peace of mind, as it places this article at the right point of pretension.

The work presented below attempts to collect our interpretation and apprehension of some theoretical concepts that, from the experience of intervention on real artworks over many years, are essential in the discipline of conservation and restoration of contemporary art. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects that it can contribute is its pragmatic approach. This is an approach aimed at the theoretical study of the fundamentals that govern the deontology of the discipline, but directed at the methodological advances that must always be present in the conservation and restoration of cultural assets.

That theory is constantly evolving to adapt to the problems of contemporary art is a fact that we have observed over the years. This evolution and theoretical deepening, which we have also experienced personally, leads us in this work to the analysis of the concepts that began guiding the profession a few years ago, from an evolutionary perspective, with the intention

of determining its current state and to provide our personal contribution.

It is known that one of the first researchers to address the subject of contemporary art conservation was Heinz Althöfer (1991), who understood the dimension of the problem affecting the conservation of the art of his time. From a need for survival of contemporary heritage, heritage of its time, he proposed a pioneering and useful methodological change which laid the foundations for future theoretical deepening.

For Althöfer, unlike previous theoreticians, contemporary work was something close, something that already raised the urgent need for conservation. Under his point of view the participation of the artist, as creator, in the hermeneutic process of interpretation was raised as a fundamental question because the artist was the one who could best help the conservator to acquire knowledge, from an ontological point of view, of the work. It is also important to quote Hiltrud Schinzel who has delved into the problem, taking the work of art into a more psychological realm, raising the importance of artistic experience as the essential question and relegating the importance of matter to a second level: 'Physical form is therefore no longer essential for the existence of the work of art; hence the material expression of the artistic idea is relatively insignificant.' (Schinzel 2003, 50). This is a courageous

affirmation that exposes how much the work, as object of the experience, had to be apprehended from a phenomenological perspective (Schinzel 2008).

Subsequently, concern for the survival of the art of contemporaneity, understood as a category of temporality and not as a historical epoch, is approached in different events bringing together the different agents involved in the conservation of contemporary art: the artist, the restorer, the curator, the art historian, and the philosopher, evidencing that the approach to the problem had to be plural.

Shortly afterwards, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, INCCA, was created. It emerged as an initiative of 11 European institutions and its main objective is currently '... to develop, share and preserve the knowledge necessary for the conservation of modern and contemporary art' (INCCA).

Recently, different conferences have delved into the themes on which analysis is currently focused: identity, values, authenticity, reproduction, or interpretation of contemporary artwork. These are the topics we will deal with next.

Apprehending the work of art: an ontological approach

The conservator-restorer of works of art 'is an operator of the true, an agent of the Truth' (Muñoz Viñas 2003, 84); 'Truth' with capital letters, objective truth, the truth of what is really, the truth of the ontological, of what the work of art is, something whose knowledge the restorer intends to acquire for each artwork (and in the case of contemporary art, the task is complex).

We can start from the premise that the conservator has the function of transmitting what the work of art really is. This is an important challenge, since, in order to conserve and bequeath what the work really is, we would have to assume that knowledge of the Truth is possible. As a principle, in the face of this acquired responsibility, it is obvious that the deep knowledge of the entity becomes essential, because it is difficult to transmit to the future what is unknown. And, when talking about the entity, a definition is necessary. We can define the entity as something that is, something that exists: in this case, our work of art. For Heidegger 'the being is always the being of an entity' (Heidegger 2005, 32). According to this author, the ontic is what refers to the entities, whereas the ontological is what refers to being, the reason why it is necessary to distinguish between what the entity is, and the action of being.

To know what the artwork really is implies the study of what the Truth is. As Heidegger and Muñoz Martínez point out, Truth is a property of being itself; a property, in this case, inherent to the work of art and which constitutes, according to Heidegger, authenticity. The

entity is true insofar as it is authentic, insofar as it is represented as it is: the Truth would then be equal to the entity (2006, 240).

Search for that Truth leads us to have to reflect on what is essential in contemporary artwork. Different thinkers have analyzed the phenomenon of art. For Hegel, '... the work of art offers itself to sensitive apprehension,' the work of art allows the idea to be perceived when it is in a sensitive, perceivable form (1985, 30). Is that sensitive form then the object of conservation-restoration? Faced with the diversity of situations we find in contemporary art, the answer to the question would be no, only, today.

The work of art is a product of a human being, a sensitive product through which the manifestation of the idea is produced, a product that makes this idea accessible to contemplation; 'the work of art is a material object through which the artist has been able to show us the authentically decisive of the real' (Muñoz Martínez 2006, 253). Would it therefore be a necessary form, as a category, for the knowledge of the idea?

In contemporary art, however, the importance of the artwork as a multisensory experience stands out. Art of our days must be understood from the mid-twentieth century revolutions, and consequently the classical restoration theories are being updated since the assimilation of art to beauty and its purely aesthetic role has been widely surpassed.

At this point, we enter fully into the field of conservation because the particularized, epistemic analysis, which seeks the knowledge of the Truth of each artwork to be preserved, unique in contemporary art, loaded conceptually and symbolically, must be the starting point of any proposal.

Gustavo Caponi (2018, 10) analyses the concepts of identity and essence using Ferrater Mora's *Philosophy Dictionary* (1975a, 552) as a source. Thus, the principle of individuation alludes to what makes a thing that thing it is, a principle that governs the originality of the specific contemporary artwork, a principle so sought after and desired by artists in the investigation and deepening of their own plastic language. This principle explains that two individual entities, although belonging to the same natural class, can be different and recognizable.

On the other hand, *what makes a thing the kind that it is*, would be the what of the thing, the essence of the thing. This idea of essentiality is a property of the entity, as in the case of individuation, and we believe that it is a fundamental line of study in the discipline of conservation of contemporary art.

In the search for an understanding of what the work of art in particular consists of, the concrete artwork as an object of conservation, it is important to analyze the concepts of essence, idiosyncrasy (particularity of an individual thing), quiddity, and identity, words that might seem synonymous but are not. Essence is the

substance for Aristotle. Essence is a general concept, which can also be expressed with other terms such as form or nature. It is what defines the thing, a predicate. For Xavier Zubiri 'essence is that for which reality is such' (Zubiri 1962), a definition that we consider enlightening and quite close to the ontological consideration of the medieval philosophers who contributed the concept of quiddity, nuancing that this can be used as a concrete way of understanding essence.

Thus, quiddity answers the question *quid est res?* and helps to define the entity, since quiddity is equal to essence as a form which, together with matter, determines it in what it is. It is that which places reality within its corresponding genre. Quiddity is a noun, a concrete answer to the question for the what. Quiddity is not a universal concept in general, and here refers to the most important, but is universal insofar as it determines the thing in what it is. It is not a generic notion, or idea, or abstract entity. It relates essence, understood as a common abstract, a unit of the physical moment of the entity (Ferrater Mora 1975b).

For conservators it is crucial to understand the concept of the quiddity of the thing. Faced with possible conflicts between discrepant factors for the conservation of the individual entity, which will appear, reaching the knowledge of the Truth, of the authenticity of the artwork, if possible, will serve as a guide in the decision-making process.

Difference between identity and essence is clear if we ask the questions: 'Which is that thing?' and 'What is that thing?' Identity answers the question: 'Which?' while the essence answers the question: 'What?' Ontologically, the essence relates to the main and necessary qualities of the work of art, and the qualities make the work, in this case, what it is.

Therefore, although the knowledge of the identity of the contemporary artwork is important, the study and attempt to apprehend the essence is much more important. This is a position that we have been defending for a long time and that we consider capital to succeed in the processes of intervention. In fact, we could have an actual work of art perfectly identified, but not classified, because we need to have understood its essence to be able to include it in a type of natural class. This point, in an incipient state, was already addressed by Althöfer in his classification of the types of works or types of problems that the conservator-restorer of contemporary art could encounter at that time, a list that we have expanded in previous publications and that may continue to be expanded in the future (Llamas Pacheco 2014, 36).

It is interesting to reflect at this moment, and we cannot avoid doing so, on the possibility or not of reaching the knowledge of the Truth. That is to say, on the possibility of getting to know what the artwork really is. If we accept that it is possible to

reach the knowledge of the Truth, of the entity, as Heidegger said, then we can ask ourselves how to do it; that is to say, through what cognitive means.

Conservators, at least as an intention, will try, in the processes of interpretation and apprehension, to get closer to the most authentic state or states of the work. Perhaps the perspectivist stance of Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset (2007, 45–55) is applicable to our discipline. How to get the correct interpretation of the artwork, the knowledge of the thing itself assuming that the correct interpretation, according to this current, could be the sum of all possible interpretations, individual, from different points of view. Also, bearing in mind that the truth of a proposition cannot be measured in relation to an absolute truth, since, in our case, each interpretation will be determined by a cultural and contextual background.

However, the figure of the artist, as the author of the artwork, can help us enormously from a hermeneutic point of view. But we think that what the work of art in particular is, its quiddity, is also shaped by what other agents contribute to the process of knowledge: the way in which the artwork is presented, the influence of the moment in which it is perceived, previous experience of the spectators, the interaction of the public, and its previous social representations; that is, by everything that determines how and why a work of art is perceived in a specific and different way for each spectator.

From a skeptical position, and based on direct contact with artists through the realization of countless personal interviews, in the framework of practical conservation-restoration we could say that, through this source, the Truth-Authenticity of the work of art is not well defined and could become even mutable. This is because the artist, as a human being, also forgets, evolves, and submits to the pressures of the art market.

In any case, the terms 'artistic intention' and 'meaning of the work' are usually used with little precision by conservators-restorers and must be analyzed in depth. The term 'artistic intention' presents variations in meaning. Mieke Bal points out that concepts travel and vary their significance from one community to another of scientists, of cultural contexts. (Bal 2002, 30–31) points out that '... the equation of meaning with the intention of the author or artist, with all the problems that this entails, is due to this unthinking equation of words and concepts.' Thus, we also observe from experience that we would be faced with two concepts widely used in the documentation of contemporary art: meaning of the artwork, and artistic intention (Wharton 2015), and even a third in our view: the opinion of the artist, usually equated in an unthinking way.

An interesting question is whether the authenticity of the work is only limited to the artistic intention. At

one time we defended moderate intentionalism as the appropriate approach for interpretation of the work of art, although not for the knowledge of where its quiddity lies since it is a current that takes into account the artistic intention in the process of interpretation, among other things. Can we assume that the Truth of the artwork is only in the artistic intention understood as dogma? From our point of view, we would not be in contradiction with Althöfer and a large number of authors who defend the importance of the artist in the process of constructing meaning, but it would be necessary to complete the knowledge of this intention with many other elements that determine what the work of art is.

On the other hand, the analysis of the artwork solely from a rationalist position does not seem adequate either, understanding that only reason will lead us to the knowledge of authenticity. Other positions point out interesting questions regarding this subject.

Criticism posits that knowledge is possible, but it is not unquestionable (this paragraph should be understood as an analysis of the Truth-Authenticity deposited in the artistic intention). Perspectivism states that Truth-Authenticity exists, but that when knowing it we capture it only from a partial *visión*. This is a very appropriate point of view if we relate it with perception, aesthetic experience, the type of public, and its previous baggage whose conjunction would conform the artwork. Other postures, however, deny the possibility of reaching the Truth. For subjectivism, determining what is authentic would depend on each subject while for relativism, recognizing something as true or authentic would depend on each culture, epoch, or social group.

In relation to conservation and from a more pragmatic point of view, as opposed to the essence there are the accidental qualities of the entity: those that are not necessary for knowledge of the work of art, that might not last, and that could be modified or replaced if necessary. This ontological category is very interesting for restorers, because again, faced with the emergence of conflicts between the possibility of conservation of pristine matter and respect for artistic intention it can help in the decision-making process. Thus, the substitution or disappearance of anecdotal elements, not substantial in the artwork, would not necessarily affect its authenticity.

At this point it should be noted that the work of art is a cultural product worthy of preservation (Martore 2009). It is a product loaded with values, including economic values, linked to authenticity, as Breuil points out. Her point of view on authenticity in terms of cultural value is interesting:

Each person will come to a different concept of authenticity, in terms of cultural value, also created by economics, by the art market, and it is linked to the need for the art work to be an original in order to maintain its value in the art market. (Breuil 2014, 15)

Breuil notes that an economic view of the problem, linked to the need for the work of art to come from the hand of the artist, is a primordial question for determining its authenticity. This a view from the perspective of the art market that we also perceive, and which, however, in the case of contemporary art is not decisive either since in many cases the artworks are not even made by the artists themselves. We could not attribute the authenticity of the entity to the exclusive origin of the artist's hand.

The work of art is part of cultural heritage. It is a cultural product, although not every cultural product acquires the artistic *status*. In this sense, the valuation of the artwork helps to identify those material and immaterial elements that make it worthy of conservation. Conservators-restorers must know these values, while affecting them on some occasions.

Iwona Szmelter (2013) has suggested that the conservator-restorer becomes a 'defender' of these values, while providing an interesting classification of them according to two categories, the historical-cultural and socio-economic cultural ones. The concept of identity studied by this author, in relation to the social group, is important and picks up a question pointed out by several authors. In this article we try to focus on the concept of quiddity of the artistic entity, differentiating it from that of identity, although obviously, the artistic legacy, as a cultural product, contributes to the formation of group identity.

Several authors have dealt with the issue of the identity of contemporary artworks (Laurenson 2006; Martore 2009; Kapelouzou 2010), analyzing how the identity can be related to authenticity in the case of current works of art. But, as explained at the beginning of this article, identity answers the question: 'Which is the artwork?', and knowing which is a work does not tell us about the essential questions of the entity. It is true that the term, in the field of the theory of conservation and restoration of contemporary art, manifests the need to address the issue of authenticity detached from matter and more linked to the cultural plane of the object. But we think that the term identity does not respond exactly to what is intended by using it referred to the work of art as an individual entity.

From the point of view of aesthetic experience, Verbeeck (2019b) puts the focus on attentionality, highlighting the position of Gérard Genette (1997) that it is not the object alone that carries the artwork, but the relationship between the artistic intention and the attention of the spectator, hence the importance of attentional values. On the other hand, the same author contributes an interesting concept, that of the stratification of the different historical perceptions of the work of art, which would constitute a *patina* referred, this time, to the conceptual plane.

Muñoz Viñas (2003, 84–85) points out the different currents of thought that address the issue of the

authenticity of the work of art, dividing them into four categories: the authentic state as the pristine state, that is, the state that the object should have even if it has never had it, according to Viollet-le-Duc's theory (1863); the authentic state as the present state, according to Ruskin's theory (1819–1900) 'the only concept of truth that can be considered real and incontestably true is the present state,' a point of view also defended by Muñoz Viñas; the authentic state as the one that the object had when it was produced, according to Riegl's theory (1858–1905); and the authentic state as the state intended by the author. In this sense, perhaps the most common position in the field of contemporary art conservation is the one closest to Althöfer's ideas, that which identifies the authentic state as the one claimed by the author.

In all cases, the concept of authenticity seems to consider mainly architecture or traditional art, but contemporary art has placed us in new situations (Scott 2016). In fact, we may find works that are temporarily not materialized, but will be in the future. We are referring to artworks that are no longer perennial, that will acquire a physical consistency intermittently, so that the replacement of matter necessary for contemplation is part of the concept and perhaps the artist's hand may not even be necessary. We would face the eternal present in the work of art and in fact a perpetual pristine state.

Which would be the authentic state of these works? We would have to think about it in terms of approximation to the knowledge of the Truth, which from our point of view is not possible. Although again, and from a pragmatic point of view, thinking about the task of the conservators who have to face the fact of the reedition or rematerialization of the idea, it can be sustained in the exhaustive documentation of artistic intention; of the concept it embodies, its materiality, and the historic context of the artworks consist. Also in the documentation of the perceptions of the public; in short, in the documentation of everything that can help us in the process of understanding the work of art. In this attempt to approach the authentic state of the entity interviews with artists can be useful and will help us to interpret, once their limitations are understood. However, is it enough to know the artistic intention and the nature of the matter in order to get to know the artwork?

From an empirical and phenomenological point of view, we could reach the knowledge through the use of the senses, something that, in the case of contemporary art where multisensory works of art are habitual, seems very appropriate. We would be talking about art as an aesthetic experience, which would constitute the quiddity of the thing, and, therefore, it would liberate conservators, in some specific cases, from the historical need of conservation of the matter as object of our job. The matter would become a mere support for aesthetic

experience, and the conservator would be the mediator capable of achieving, through prior knowledge of the artwork, the synesthetic effect of contemplation.

From our point of view authenticity must be understood as detached from matter, the way in which it has been traditionally studied. Assuming that the Truth of a work of art does not reside only in its material part, a statement that would remain incomplete, but in its quiddity, since it gathers the primordial and necessary qualities of our work of art in particular that make the artwork what it is. In this sense, for years we have been including in our interviews with artists the question: 'What is what constitutes the essential in your work, what is truly essential, what cannot be altered even with the passage of time?' (Llamas Pacheco 2014, 73).

On the other hand, another ontological category closely related to the conservation of contemporary art is the quality, that is, the capacity of the object to have some property. Locke (2002) established two types of qualities, the primary ones, inseparable from objects, and the secondary ones, qualities that are not really found in the things themselves but that contribute possibilities of producing sensations in us. This interpretation is very appropriate and useful for our study. It is interesting, in the field of interpretation, that what the spectator perceives when interacting with an installation, for example, is not directly implicit in the matter of the work, in the artistic elements that have been arranged in the space, but in the interaction of the spectator himself with the place, time, lighting, image, touch, hearing, previous information, and personal sensitivity. All these factors will come into play when apprehending the artwork, and for each individual, the interpretation may be specific. The secondary qualities of the objects would be able, in a subjective way, to produce ideas or sensations in the individual.

If the consistency of an object is given by the sum of its substantial and accidental properties, what determines the consistency of a work of art would be the set of essential properties or essential aspects together with, in some cases, the biography of the artwork. This biography would collect the transformations necessary, so the matter could assume to fulfill its function of facilitating artistic experience.

These secondary qualities would come into play in the process of interpreting and helping to construct the meaning from a constructivist point of view, of sensory experimentation. They must be taken into account, since the artwork, as a symbolic entity, cannot confine its meaning to the purely material.

Truth-Authenticity must be detached from the return to the original condition of matter, and from the closest return to the original condition of matter, and it would not only be in the present state of the object. Authenticity would be on a higher plane than

matter, and for each paradigm it should be analyzed specifically. This forces us to assume that the restorer will try to apprehend the Truth of the entity, which would even be above the artistic intention and above matter, and would also include the sensory, phenomenological, and psychological aspects that the spectator contributes to the process of experimentation of the artwork. In addition, restorers will try to minimize the relative subjectivity present in any intervention process.

About interpretation

It is not the task of the conservator-restorer to decide what is art and what is not. The work of art arrives already characterized in that status and their function will consist of bequeathing it to the future (Verbeeck 2019a, 200).

Is there only one possible interpretation of the work of art? What is the role of the author in the constitution of the meaning of the work? This issue has been studied extensively, and several positions have been taken. As Sixto J. Castro points out, singularist current defends the position that only one interpretation is acceptable for a work of art. On the other hand, however, multiplicists claim that there is more than one acceptable interpretation, although there may sometimes be only one admissible interpretation. At the same time, 'Critical pluralism denies that the search for a single correct interpretation is the only possible hermeneutical objective.' (Castro 2012, 50). Also interesting is the position of hermeneutic anarchism that defends that any interpretation is as good as any other. It is not strange to find this last argument on many occasions, when the interpretation demands an effort that it is not willing to make. And, in turn, in relation to the search for meaning, critical monism defends that there is only one true comprehensive interpretation.

For Danto, a constructivist, the process of interpretation literally creates the work of art, because it brings into existence something that did not exist before that interpretation took place (Danto 2002, 184).

In this context, authorial intentionalism proposes that the meaning is in the object itself, that it means what the author determines, and that there is only one correct interpretation. This information may not be available, or could sometimes be obtained from interviews with artists. But, in any case, only one meaning would be adequate.

On the other hand, the anti-intentionalist current points out that the meaning changes over the years even for the author himself, is not immutable, and can be forgotten. Furthermore, the difficulty of evaluating and applying artistic intention in the face of the ambiguity of the term 'intention' has also been discussed, since it can present multiple variations of

meaning (Dykstra 1996). Even the artist himself can decide that the artwork means what the public wants it to mean, or even that, sometimes, the author does not know what the artwork means.

At the same time, moderate intentionalism determines that the attribution of meaning to the sign is not automatic and collaboration with the artist is necessary, even understanding its limitations (forgetting, mutation of intention, pressure from the art market).

These are possible situations that must be analyzed by placing them on a more superficial plane, which helps the knowledge of the entity but behind which would be the search for the substantial, for that which sublies, for the true. As conservators-restorers, we have experienced how in interviews with artists the situations can be very varied.

The vision of the multiplicists is better suited to our position, previously defended in relation to the search for Truth: the interpretation is influenced by the environment, by the moment of contemplation, the psychological aspects of the interpreter, and the previous cultural and social representations because the person is part of the process and makes it multiple, being different for each interpreter. The artist may have determined a meaning, which must be known, but the participation of all the other factors explained above will determine experimentation.

It seems clear that any process of intervention of a contemporary artwork should begin with its interpretation. To interpret is to understand and know; to interpret is to attribute to the work of art a set of properties within a certain indetermination and experience its qualities. Interpretation has to be the first step in decision making if we want to succeed in the proposed conservation process.

Indeed, many of the above possibilities are present in the documentation. And all this leads us to assume that the task of apprehending the artwork, of knowing its Truth, is not easy, although understanding this difficulty and need of the decision-making process is in itself a good starting point.

New paradigms and times in the work of art

Before beginning to address the issue of time in relation to the conservation and restoration of contemporary art, it is necessary to study the different paradigms on which the ethics of conservation can be based. The traditional paradigm of scientific conservation, although sometimes valid, cannot be the only one in which the conservator-restorer may sustain the decision-making process. It is no longer only the matter of the artwork that is restored, and in the face of new situations caused by the artists themselves, restorers need a new code of ethics.

In the ethical paradigm of performance proposed by René Van de Vall (2017), 'the core of the work is the concept' and the action consists of... 'carrying out a reliable representation of a set of instructions that define the identity of the work.' In this paradigm, into which a good number of current works could be included, the re-edition, re-materialization, re-concretion of the idea, would be perfectly acceptable because as Van de Vall points out the artwork is understood as a more or less detailed set of instructions which specify what is really important.

In addition, the author proposes a second paradigm: the processual paradigm, 'in which it is not the correspondence between an eventual result and a pre-existing concept, but the process, which is understood as the core of the work' (Figures 1–3).

And perhaps we could add one more, **the paradigm of the death** of the work of art. The possibility of the death of the work of art has been pointed out by Mario Sousa (2015). However, we consider it essential to establish a paradigm that addresses the code of ethics that deals with this circumstance. In this paradigm there is a new situation, the acceptance of the death of the work, not only of matter, but of what the artwork really is. In this case we would be faced with the impossibility of taking the Truth of the work of art to the world of perception, due to different conditioning factors and limitations of a material, technical, or intentional type, which would affect issues that at the time were established as essential to the entity.

These new paradigms have emerged as a result of the need to update the ethical and deontological codes, a need generated by the artworks themselves

and by their specificities in relation to their transmission to the future.

We will now analyse different points of view from which time and space-time can be studied as a category, in relation to the conservation-restoration of contemporary art.

Time from the perspective of the human

Biological time could be of interest to us when studying the conservation of contemporary artworks. Biological time, although that of living organisms, can be assimilated to the duration of the work of art. Biological time is the time of development of an organism within a species, the time of normal duration of the organism from birth to death. Do works of art have a duration in these terms? Should this be an issue specified by the artists themselves? How long should the work of art last in the case of works that are re-materialized?

Why do we speak of biological time in the conservation of contemporary art? It is the artist himself who relates the passage of time, even the duration of the artwork itself, with his own time, with his biological time. In many interviews with artists, when asked how long their works should last, the answer often denoted an understanding of the passage of time in relation to their own existence, rather than in terms of long-term conservation.

On the other hand, it is also possible to find the opposite position, the concern for the use of materials and techniques of good quality and contrasted results, in this occasion trying to take the object beyond this time, beyond the life time of the artist. In any case,

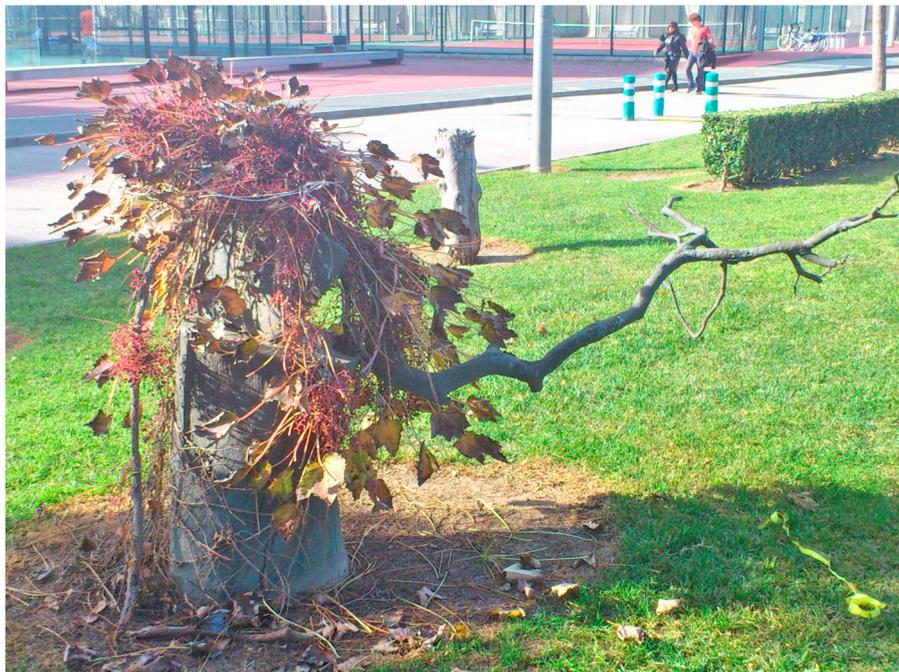


Figure 1. *Murmurs of the forest*, Miguel Molina, 2002. The work of art is appreciated in autumn. The appearance changes through the seasons. We would be in front of the paradigm of the procesual artwork.



Figure 2. *Murmurs of the forest*, Miguel Molina, 2002. The work of art is appreciated in winter.

biological time is present at the moment of creation; the time that affects the artist's life is at the bottom of the perception of the temporal limits of the artwork.

The eternal present

Does the entity need continuous materialization to exist? Does the artwork reside in its sensitive materialization, necessary for contemplation? Can the work exist as an idea? These questions have been raised by the artists themselves, who have placed before us intermittent artworks which are materialized for a certain moment and space, with the possibility or not of re-edition.

Matter, in these cases, is also present, although in a particular way. On the one hand we find the necessary documentation for the description and authentication

of what the artwork consists of: the artist's project explained in a minimal but necessary matter for the transmission. On the other hand, when the time arrives, we have the necessary matter for each edition, which can be discarded from one occasion to the next. The work of art would be experimented on each occasion with a new matter, in a pristine state, so that the passage of time over it would not influence the experimentation. The artist would have placed matter in an eternal present, freeing the artwork from the tyranny of degradation (Figure 4). Finally, we find a third possibility: the work is present in its documentary remains, in texts, photographs, graphics, in objects that have been collected as a testimony and that can acquire the artistic *status* or be simple documentation.



Figure 3. *Murmurs of the forest*, Miguel Molina, 2002. The work of art is appreciated in spring.



Figure 4. *Efimeras*, by Yolanda Gutiérrez Acosta, 2002. A detail of the work is appreciated. The installation consists of a series of flowers made with yellow butterfly wings deposited on a bed of fresh flowers.

In these cases the aura would have been detached from the matter, so that authenticity would not be linked to the original and unrepeatable that comes from the hand of the artist. The aura would be linked to cultural and social aspects, to the accumulation of previous experimentations, to the construction of cultural memory and, to a certain extent, to iconic and attentional values. It would be a question of overcoming Benjamin's concept of aura, because even speaking of reproducibility, there would be no loss in re-materialization.

Time as a constructor agent

It is also possible to find artworks where the artist makes use of time as a constructor agent. It is a matter of making premeditated use of time from the moment of creation, so that the process and premeditated transformation constitute the authentic. In this case, time as an interval, as the second time noted by Brandi (2011, 29), produces a desired change in the artwork. This conscious use of the effect of the passage of time is an exclusive feature of contemporary art: the artwork is constructed through the voluntary process of transformation of matter. This type of artwork includes, for example, those whose rotten flesh allows a beautiful poem to appear from within, or those where the different seasons transform the appearance, according to the different seasons of the year.

Time as a destructive agent

It is important to study the relationship that exists between the passage of time and the matter of the

work of art, that which makes possible the contemplation of the entity, or rather in the case of contemporary art, that which serves the **experimentation** of the entity.

Faced with the need for conservation or restoration of a contemporary artwork, once the work has been apprehended, that is, once the effort of understanding has been made, we will be in a position to analyse whether the condition state of the matter allows it to fulfill its function as mediator or facilitator of experimentation. How has the passage of time affected the matter, degrading it? Is this state affecting the quiddity? Sometimes, some values are linked to the qualities of the materials. In that case, transformation due to aging can affect essential issues regarding it.

Change is part of the natural life of the materials (Hölling 2016). Deterioration agents will inevitably affect them, degrading them irreversibly. This transformation could affect the essential, so that matter is no longer able to fulfill its mission. At this moment, when there is a conflict between the condition of matter and its capacity to carry the work, it is necessary to study and specify what matter has become: relic, ruin, testimony, icon, etc. Several *statuses* of the work of art and of matter are possible: original, replica, facsimile, re-materialization of the idea, etc.

The ruin

Many contemporary artworks are presented in a state of ruin or ruin-relic. Brandi's definition of ruin (Brandi 2011, 24) is incomplete in the case of contemporary art. For Brandi (Basile 2007, 82), ruin is 'the extreme case of a manufacture, reduced to a barely recognizable testimony of a work.' In this case, the only possible

intervention is conservation, never restoration, because it would lead us to the false.

However, in contemporary art we find more complex situations. We can encounter artworks in which the degradation has not reached the extreme, even works with small pathologies that, nevertheless, are affecting essential questions of the work so that the artistic experience intended by the author is no longer possible. We would be faced with the impossibility of the entity's experimentation, with a conceptual ruin, since matter, even in quite good condition, is not capable of sustaining the true meaning of the work of art. This would be the case of a yellowish white monochrome, or of a work by Klein with a small pictorial gap on its surface.

The definition of ruin in the case of contemporary art could be:

the state in which the artwork, after the passage of time, is sustained in a matter that has been subjected to the effects of the physical, chemical, biological and anthropological agents of deterioration, so that it has reached a point at which it is no longer capable of supporting the intended aesthetic discourse, so that the semantic plane would be strongly affected by the condition of matter. (Llamas Pacheco 2016, 216)

And a few years after we published this definition, we think that it can be updated at this moment, because it denotes that its starting point is located in the artistic intention, assimilated to the aesthetic discourse, or of another type, claimed by the artist.

Although we still think that speaking of the conceptual plane of the artwork, the one that encompasses everything that makes reference to the understanding of the essential, is opportune at a more pragmatic level, the focus should be placed on the fact that the Truth of the work of art would even be above

the artistic intention. An updated definition of ruin could be:

the state in which the artwork, after the passage of time, manifests itself through matter that has been subjected to the effects of, physical, chemical, biological and anthropological deterioration agents, so that it has reached a point at which it is no longer capable of facilitating the entity's experimentation.

About the ruin-relic

In this case, the preserved object is not capable of facilitating experimentation, as we said, but this impossibility is obvious, clear, given the poor condition of matter. The object deserves to be preserved because it embodies values of a cultural, intentional, historical, or iconic type, although it is obvious that it has been damaged in its essential aspects. In the case of conceptual ruin, perhaps the case is not so clear, and the damage caused to the artwork may not be perceived.

Conclusions

A necessity to update the ethical and deontological code for the conservation of contemporary art has been evident for years. Addressing the decision-making processes in the field of restoration of contemporary art only from the paradigm of scientific restoration was not possible. The paradigm of the death of the artwork, provided in this article, can serve as an ethical framework for the conservator-restorer on some occasions. This issue must be determined case by case, depending on where the quiddity of the artwork lies, depending on what the artwork is, depending on where the Truth-Authenticity is, because sometimes, even above the artistic intention,



Figure 5. *Self-portrait of the artist, well done, badly done, not done*, Robert Filliou, 1973. The artwork denotes the need for interpretation before beginning any intervention process.

it could be determined that a work of art has ceased to exist.

This theoretical update has been carried out little by little in the face of the new challenges that were being presented. Restorers have been adapting the intervention criteria from a casuistic position, that is, analyzing for each artwork, in which paradigm it should be included. Sometimes we have done so intuitively, due to the weight of logic itself, but fortunately, today we have a solid, useful, and necessary theoretical reinforcement from which to approach the interventions from a common starting point: the apprehension of what the work of art really is, at least that must be the intention. This understanding, which must take into account the multiple agents that help to construct meaning, is not a simple task (Figure 5). The artist, situated in his concrete place, helps in the hermeneutic process of interpretation and, in turn, the interpreter is an active agent in the construction of meaning.

To interpret the artwork is to know its qualities; to experience its properties; to assume its values, always subjective, culturally determined; to know the identity, a complex term, much discussed at present: we refer to the identity assumed as a product of a process of construction always active, an identity that is constantly reconstructed, conformed from the biography and that postulates an otherness. But to know is, above all, to understand where the essential part of the entity is situated, what the entity consists of, and this would even be above the artistic intention.

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