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CONSERVATION - RESTORATION ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERN ART *

At first sight conservation-restoration ethics seems to be a cultural, and thus temporal phenomenon. This may imply that it is only valid to a limited extent; that it is relative by nature. There is, however, a deeper significance in conservation-restoration ethics as enshrined in existing codes. This makes one wonder whether these codes do not in fact formulate truth instead of temporary conventions.

Conservation-restoration ethics is based on the *apriori*, all too often confirmed by experience, that conservation-restoration is always an interpretation of the object concerned and therefore implies the risk of being a mistaken, anachronistic interpretation. Another *apriori* at the root of conservation-restoration ethics is that we have a responsibility for the future in allowing upcoming generations to have a past as we ourselves have had one, and that we do not have the right to interpret their past irreversibly on the basis of our own anachronistic interpretations.

Based on these *apriories*, Cesare Brandi came to the conclusion that besides relevant documentation it is primarily the original material of an object, or what is left of it, that can serve as a sound basis for future generations to build their own interpretations of the original appearance, function etcetera of the object. From this it follows that the conservation of the original material has the highest priority, in whatever condition it has survived.

This, however, does not mean that we are not allowed to reconstruct the object to a greater or lesser extent. Such reconstruction should – according to existing codes – be carried out as far as possible only in a reversible way, that is: without impairing or destroying the original material, nor the traces of its construction etcetera. This rule is in accordance with what was earlier stated.

Because of the foregoing we are obliged to adequately document the object as we have found it. We are allowed to intervene in the object if this is inevitable or beneficial for a satisfactory 'reading' of the work, depending on the context in which it is seen or used; but then we should also document how we have intervened. Such documentation, as well as the treatment that may have been carried out, demand the greatest honesty.

It should be emphasised that although in this approach the object primarily has the function of a source about itself, this does not imply that we have to approach it as an historic 'ruin'. Nevertheless the original substance demands our highest respect, given our responsibility to the future.

This logical construction, which slowly developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century, is based on what could be called an anthropologically or even genetically determined human condition, constituted by humankind's need for a past on the one hand, and our need to care for future generations on the other. Basic to all this is humankind's need of a memory and a built-in urge regarding the transition of memories to later generations.

Torn between the present and the future

In theory, the only way to intervene in this natural continuum may be a cultural revolution: the destruction of the past in order to build a completely controlled future. We have seen in the last century that cultural revolutions fail in the end and that human nature, in the sense described above, cannot be bridled.

Nevertheless modern art, and to some extent art in general, tends to revolutionise culture by striving to influence the present and the future as well as our perception of the past. One could say that much late nineteenth- and twentieth- century art by its very nature has, or tries to have, an existential impact on the way we experience the past as well as the future. It attempts to have the quality of a statement, a manifesto, which, as it were, determines the present with as much force as possible. It is the 'here and now-ness' that counts!

The conservator-restorer involved in putting the work of art as a statement across, by being involved in organising and shaping its presentation, can, according to the conservator Hiltrud Schinzel, be seen as an 'art-promoting person' while helping to present the work with maximum

impact. In that situation, the conservator-restorer deals primarily with the visual impact of the work according to the artist's real or presumed wishes. He or she participates in a performance that is rather theatrical than museal in the traditional sense.

But: the theatre is the place where lies create truth – interventions are taken which in the view of conservation-restoration ethics are heavyhanded and highly unethical – radical repairs including complete reconstructions or, in the case of paintings, overpaintings. Such interventions may be carried out for the sake of the moment and may imply a serious loss of authenticity of the object as a source about itself and its maker.

Thus in the field of contemporary art the conservator-restorer is torn between two forces: the existential power of the work as a statement in the present and his or her awareness that the object at some point, probably very soon, will be absorbed into the stream of time, becoming an historical object as well and deserving the utmost care as a source about its original appearance, own meaning and function for future generations.

Different speeds of transformation

Apart from the anthropological and restoration ethics anchored in a conservator-restorer's role to preserve the past for the future, and the existential involvement of the artist to make a strong statement, there is thus a third aspect involved – the inevitability of the object's transformation over time. This transformation does not only involve the ageing and changing of the material but especially takes place in the minds of the beholders. As to this last type of transformation, Brandi noted in his *Teoria del Restauro* that the object is constantly reborn in the minds of those who see it and that it is undergoing a multitude of transformations in the process.

For the conservator-restorer it is important to be aware of this phenomenon. To someone, for instance, who has known the artist or was once an assistant in his/her studio or helped in the presentation of the object, the speed of transformation is much slower than for the young conservator-restorer of a later generation. The first category of conservators tends to prolong the present, in an effort to support the strength and actuality of the artist's statement. For the young conservator, the same artist and the same object may be already history, with all the consequences this may entail for the care of the object as a source about the past and the sense of responsibility for its transition to the future. In this situation, the autonomy of conservation-restoration ethics already takes over for younger conservator-restorers while for older ones the present and the 'theatrical' function of the object prevails.

The transformation of a work of art is tragic. Who would not like to prolong its 'here and nowness'? No doubt, like other aspects of human life, the existential forces at first have priority over prudence and conservative forces. But, like in the existential situation of humankind, the transition of present into past is inevitable. And behind existential forces such as the lack of fear for risks, in a present situation there is also the natural inclination to care and the need to prolong life. It is then the classical ethics of conservation takes over even before the object's existential power as part of the (prolonged) present has faded.

Of course, given the transitoriness of many objects of contemporary art, the task to preserve is almost impossible. However, unless transitoriness is an integral and explicit part of the artist's statement, one should not be resigned to these objects decaying, believing that a proper documentation would suffice to maintain the memory of an object. Documentation is always biased. One should rather stick to the adage that conservation-restoration does not mean doing the possible, but that it should mean doing the impossible. The classical ethics of restoration may then be the force behind the development of technical innovation which, as so often happened in the past, would make seemingly impossible acts of preservation possible.

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