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THE ETHICS OF CONSERVING MODERN ART

Contemporary art development and the philosophical transformation of the concept of art in the second half of the 20th century have led to changes in the approach to the conservation and restoration of pieces of art. Art, which was perceived as a decorative and aesthetic luxury item for centuries, departed from the function of interior decoration and instead started conveying experiences, thoughts, and ideas. The value of simple reproduction of visual images has been lost. Artists have set out to study and rethink light, colour, form, and the very essence of art. Changes in the understanding of the value of works of art and in the nature of the creation of contemporary art have challenged conservators causing the paradigm of art preservation to substantively shift.

This issue has been indirectly considered by many scholars, namely: Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield in their paper 'Conservation of Easel Paintings', Héliá Marçal in the article 'Contemporary Art Conservation', Tom Learner in his 'Modern Paints' paper, Liubov Lioda and Lesia Dzendzeliuk in 'Ethical and Aesthetic Principles of Conservation and Restoration Activities', etc.

The article aims to highlight conservation and restoration ethics as the crucial component in contemporary art restoration, which is generally accepted and tested in world practice.

In the second half of the 20th century, artists formulated new statements for art based on the idea. American artist and author of theoretical research on conceptual art Sol Lewitt (1928–2007) expresses the following opinion: ‘The philosophy of the work is implicit in the work... It doesn’t really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art... The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product.’¹ With such comprehensive constructions artists emphasize their designs based on history and idea. A physical object is non-critical, it acquires an unusual shape and is made from scratch. Adherence to the painting canon fades into insignificance, since artists no longer consider traditional materials to be relevant.

As a rule, conservation and preservation of pieces of contemporary art (art objects, installations, pieces made using non-traditional techniques, etc.) were not given much attention, as they differed significantly from works of canonical academic art.

The restoration of traditional paintings (oil or tempera) is mainly based on identification of materials and techniques, i.e. a classification of the piece according to artistic and stylistic devices, parameters that set a common methodology for selection of preservation methods. Owing to the inclusion of contemporary art in museum collections, expectations about the stability and durability of these pieces were questioned, leading to the issue of their conservation. In this context, conservators must understand and realise that artistic design and the singularity of pieces are the key features that must be preserved. Moreover, contemporary art restorers face completely different preservation problems arising from the use of unconventional materials and their inherent processes of decay and change².

Contemporary art conservation should be based on three components: original idea of an artist, the work itself and restoration ethics. As artistic practices change, strategies and requirements to preservation of pieces of art require revision.

Contemporary art conservation as a branch of art was formed in the 1980s in Europe and North America. In 1980 at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa one of the first international conferences on

1 Sol Lewitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (New York: Artforum, 1969).

2 Joyce Hill Stoner, Rebecca Rushfield, *Conservation of Easel Paintings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

preservation of contemporary art took place, while in the same year Heinz Althöfer published *Modern Art: A Handbook of Conservation* in same year. Conservators of Europe and America have joined forces and started collecting information on conservation methods and making recommendations for the preservation of contemporary pieces³.

The most significant growth in the preservation of contemporary art in Europe and America occurred in the 1990s. During this period, seminars and conferences were held that approved the field of contemporary art preservation and determined what research should be carried out in the coming years. In particular, the following conferences were held: *From Marble to Chocolate: On 19th- and 20th-Century Art* (Tate Gallery, London, 1995), *Modern Art: Who Cares?* (Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, Amsterdam, 1997), *Mortality Immortality?* (Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art [SBMK] and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage [ICN], Amsterdam, 1997), *A Conference of Contemporary Preservation Issues* (Getty Conservation Institute [GCI], Los Angeles, 1998). These conferences and the related publications explain the reactions of conservators and restorers to working with pieces of contemporary art. For instance, *Modern Art: Who Cares?* was the culmination of the Preservation of Contemporary Art project covering four years of interdisciplinary work. The research focused on finding ways in which conservation and works of art interact and contribute to mutual development. The project and the related conference formed the basis for the establishment of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) in 1999; the network has expanded since then having created various regional groups and now has about one and a half thousand members. INCCA is an interactive digital platform for finding and sharing news, events and resources for contemporary art preservation. Users can find projects, online publications and links to organisations and training programs in the field of restoration. This project (now a separate website) is unique since it contains descriptions and documents created and supplemented by INCCA members. Conservators from all over the

3 Hélia Marçal, ‘Contemporary art conservation’, published as part of the Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum research project (Tate, 2019).

world exchange information that may relate to one author (artist), thus creating an 'artist's virtual archive'⁴.

However, the problem of preserving 'young' art is not new; conservators faced contradictions between the conservation and restoration program and the artist's intention even before the emergence and development of contemporary and conceptual art. It is known that some impressionist artists, especially Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), were opponents of varnish, adhering to these views throughout their lives. *Landscape in Shaponval*, Pissarro (1880, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), has an inscription on the back that reads 'Do not varnish this painting', the artist's message to future conservators. The artistic design of matteness lies in the idea that it is used as a means of conveying reality. At the heart of Pissarro's negative attitude to varnish is the belief that varnish destroys the initial lightness and brightness inherent in the work, some of the most important characteristics of a piece of art. It is likely that Pissarro had this attitude towards varnish and conservators because he saw how works by the old masters darkened over time and lost their brightness after varnishing⁵.

In 1939, the Committee of Paintings of the Community of Amsterdam received a letter from artists who sold their paintings to the Stedelijk Museum. The letter referred to an early attempt of taking artistic design into account and avoiding unjustified restoration (as happened with varnishing of paintings in the 19th century). The authors were requested to provide technical information in a questionnaire stating possible cleaning, removal of varnish, framing. Artists pointed out the importance of the artistic idea and its great significance for further preservation of art.

A widely accepted approach in modern conservation is to seek dialogue with the artists, if they are still alive, in order not to neglect the artists' intentions during the study or conservation of a piece of art. In general practice, there is an especially designed document with questions about the painting and, further, the author's intentions

4 International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, <https://www.incca.org/> [accessed on 25.06.2021]. The INCCA website is an interactive digital platform to find and share news, events and resources on the conservation of modern and contemporary art.

5 Marçal, 'Contemporary Art Conservation'.

regarding its storage. Such a questionnaire demonstrates a far-sighted initiative in collecting primary information from artists⁶.

In Germany, the first attempt to systematically interview artists about the materials and techniques used in their work was by Büttner Pfänner and dates back to the early 1900s. In 1977 Heinz Althöfer launched an initiative to collect information from living artists and developed new areas of research for the preservation of contemporary art. Danielle Giraudy in 1972 and Erich Ganzert-Castrillo in 1979 carried out the first initiatives for collecting and archiving information and documentation from living artists. However, conservators of the 21st century review these lists of material and technical data from a broader perspective and document their application to other pieces in the artist's oeuvre, their expected behaviour over time, and impact of conservation measures on the artist's work⁷.

After the conference on contemporary art preservation at the National Gallery of Canada in 1980 and in discussion with other conservators, including Christoph von Imhoff and Rustin Levenson, Joyce Hill Stoner (Director, Preservation Studies Doctoral Program, UD Paintings Conservator, Winterthur/UD Program in Art Conservation) began collecting information from conservators about techniques used by artists in paintings, called ATDF (The Artist's Techniques Data File). The aim was that artists could warn conservators about the importance of conducting technical research before applying traditional conservation methods to 20th-century art. For example, abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) said that a conservator had destroyed one of his paintings by varnishing it. This information came from various stakeholders: from artists, art historians and conservators, including information from technical research. The ATDF had to be available to the international art community. Unfortunately, for technical and economic reasons, the project was terminated, although the original ATDF archives were sent to the Tate Gallery in London, the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC⁸.

6 Tom Learner, Getty Conservation Institute, *Analysis of Modern Paints* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2004).

7 Ibid.

8 Stoner, Rushfield, *Conservation of Easel Paintings*.

John Richardson's article 'Crimes Against the Cubists'⁹ published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1983 gained popularity, and the practice of varnishing Cubist paintings was widely discussed. The author's positions are not entirely new. We mentioned the negative attitude of the Impressionists to varnishing above, using the example of Pissarro, who were trying to preserve diffuse reflections from matte surfaces. Diffuse reflection is a phenomenon in which light rays are reflected in different directions when it is scattered from surface irregularities. The concept of diffuse reflection is used in three-dimensional graphics to create the impression of a spatial object.

Until 1983, conservators considered varnishing an alternative practice (preventative measure) used to preserve contemporary pieces of art. In his article, Richardson quotes the artist Georges Braque (1882–1963) with a critique of actions of the conservator who failed to adhere to restoration ethics when working on one of Braque's paintings. The article had a significant impact. Some artists, including American art critics and curators Angelica Rudenstine, Robert Rosenblum and British artist and curator John Golding (better known for his main text 'Cubism: History and Analysis') supported Richardson in his criticism of conservators. British conservator Herbert Lank commented: 'This is an unscrupulous approach, which is still practiced and shows visual ignorance, "barbarism", unacceptable in restoration circles and among art dealers. Even with the Cubists, we had seventy-five years to prevent it.'¹⁰

Richardson's article raised many questions: what is the purpose of matteness, what is the significance of three-dimensionality in pieces of art, and many others. However, paintings with matte surfaces face other conservation challenge, for example dust pollution: pieces with matte surfaces are more vulnerable to surface contaminants, and it can become impossible to remove dirt without causing irreversible changes to the painting's colour and other features¹¹.

One of the alternative measures in the conservation of matte pieces is replacing varnish with the use of glass or plexiglass (plexiglas glazing). Although glazing has its disadvantages, such as preventing

9 John Richardson, 'Crimes Against the Cubists', *The New York Review* (16.06.1983), 32–34.

10 Caroline K. Keck, Herbert Lank, Steven Miller, John Golding, Angelica Zander Rudenstine, et al., 'Crimes Against the Cubists: An Exchange', *The New York Review* (13.10.1983), 41–42.

11 Richardson, 'Crimes Against the Cubists', 32–34.

the viewer's perception of some features of the piece, its use is the best solution since the original appearance of the painting is preserved. In addition, plexiglass glazing differs from the traditional contemplation through a glass frame, which requires the viewer to find the best position to appreciate the picture's space and depth. Plexiglas has the advantage that its matte surface minimises glare and gives no flares. This method of conservation is resistant to ultraviolet light, protects against other effects of natural and artificial light, prevents fading and yellowing and subsequent destruction. Plexiglas is much lighter and thinner than glass, so it is better in transportation and installation into a frame¹².

In modern conservation, there is a marked tendency to listen to the artist's point of view, but at the same time many conservators acknowledge that other factors will also influence decisions on individual pieces of art, depending on the context, time and circumstance. The more complicated a piece of art is, the more interest there is in exploring the network of relations between the painting and all the stakeholders. Documentation plays a key role in this process¹³.

One of fine examples of conceptual art conservation is the work of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, in which conservators collaborated with the artist Władysław Hasiór. Hasiór's piece used 'symbolic garbage' the meaning of which depends on different historical and social conditions. Hasiór said: 'I use materials that whisper to me. Each item has its own meaning, and complicated ones are an aphorism. An aphorism is very similar to the truth but it is not the truth itself. I don't cut poetic tokens but study matter, which has tremendous emotional energy. To learn about it, you can just make a simple form from different materials, and each of them turns out to have a separate, individual expression. The fact I use soap or bread for my sculptures is not a demonstration of audacity but a professionally justified need.'¹⁴

Władysław Hasiór's work *Polish Bread* is an installation that consists of three-dimensional paintings based on bread and built-in metal parts. The work was attached to a wooden base with a previously

12 *Acrylic plexiglass glazing*, https://www.usaoncanvas.com/include/guide_glazing_types.php [accessed on 25.06.2021].

13 Learner, Getty Conservation Institute, *Analysis of Modern Paints*.

14 Władysław Hasiór, *Mysli o sztuce, wyb. i oprac* (Nowy Sącz: Zdzisława Zegadłówna, 1986), 9.

prepared painted background. Hasior's idea was to sacralise the bread, urging us to consider bread as a totem independent of religion. Bread is a specific totem of Christianity, Catholicism when considered in a narrower sense. According to the Bible, bread is understood not only as food for the body but above all as food for the soul. In his works, Hasior positioned small objects, in particular those with a symbolic meaning, such as a wire cross, around the bread. Wounded bread can also be seen in the context of a mutilated humanity or a blow against ideals. Working on pieces of this type, Hasior used a method he called 'paranoid-critical', a spontaneous method of irrational cognition based on critical and systematic objectification of illogical associations and interpretations. He turned bread into an art material¹⁵.

An art object, one of the materials of which is bread, is quickly destroyed by nature, but it is based on the artist's design. In this case, a restoration ethics triangle is clearly visible: conservator–original author's design–artwork. Having questioned the artist, conservators came to a joint decision: the author allowed the baking of fresh bread when the previous one had spoiled, so the museum authentically conveys the artist's design without destroying the overall concept of the installation.

Based on this article we can draw a conclusion about conservation and restoration of contemporary and conceptual art. Such works require an individual approach designed by the artists themselves. The main rule of the restoration of contemporary pieces of art is not to interfere with the original artist's design rather the conservator becomes a curator conveying the piece's idea and meaning. The basis for conservation measures should be the preservation of the artist's idea.

Artists submitting their paintings to a museum have the right to demand their correct treatment from the museum; artists can file lawsuits for improper treatment of art, as well as for destruction of their paintings by illegal actions of a conservator who failed to warn the author about changes to their design.

Restoration practice contains a generally accepted provision on observance of restoration ethics by institutions as one of crucial factors in the conservation of contemporary art. The aim is the

15 Hasior, *Myśli o sztuce, wyb. i oprac.*, 9; *Władysław Hasior*, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/wladyslaw-hasior> [accessed on 25.06.2021].

reconsideration of practices of preserving art, individual approach to paintings, dialogue with the artist, and since this area is quite new, many aspects are still being explored and adjusted. Experience shows that the author is an important source of information about a piece of art, while other information comes from technical and technological research.

At the moment, conservators' work in the field of contemporary art is just beginning in Ukraine. Museums of contemporary art have opened in Kyiv (the Museum of Modern Ukrainian Art), Lutsk (the Korsaks' Museum of Contemporary Ukrainian Art), and Odesa (the Museum of Modern Art). In Lviv there are now departments of the 20th century in some art museums, whose exhibitions include paintings by contemporary artists. Because the conservation of art is a type of restoration it is covered by restoration departments of oil or easel painting.

All museums in Ukraine that currently claim to be contemporary art museums must be artist-oriented. The restoration departments of these museums should arrange an artist database and collect information about their wishes regarding storage; any further program for contemporary art conservation should be thought over with this database in mind. The main problem for Ukrainian museums is the lack of a clear demarcation of contemporary art, as well as museums' focus on the techniques used by the artist, i.e. only the material of the piece is taken into account, the author's concept is ignored.

An urgent problem to be solved by Ukrainian restorers in museum centres is clear dating and demarcation of pieces of contemporary art, creation of a department of contemporary art conservation, development of a separate methodology for art conservation. Unfortunately, high-quality and long-term storage of pieces of contemporary art will not be guaranteed unless these problems are addressed. The offered basic principles are just a step towards preventing a big problem in the future in preservation of pieces of art made of non-traditional materials.

Restoration ethics is a major component in contemporary art restoration worldwide. It is better systematised and supplemented from year to year. Such systematisation is needed to improve and develop conservation case study. In American museums, restoration

ethics played an important role in preserving art from the 20th century and helped in solving a number of conservation dilemmas.

Restoration ethics in Ukraine is widespread and used in the restoration of art (oil, tempera paintings) but the field of contemporary art conservation is just beginning to emerge here.

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SUMMARY

The article discusses the relevance of an ethical approach to the conservation and restoration of works of contemporary and conceptual art. The way in which restoration has developed over the last 50 years has made a huge contribution to the history of art. The origins of this new field of restoration – the restoration of contemporary art – have been analysed in the study. Based on the experiences and examples considered in the article, final conclusions are made and proposals given regarding contemporary art restoration in Ukraine.

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