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TO PRESERVE THE IMPOSSIBLE – THE PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART USING THE EXAMPLE OF INSTALLATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Conservation and preservation of modern and contemporary art for future generations has become a real challenge for our age. The extreme variety of the means of expression used does not permit the application of routinely applied tried and tested rules, but their character obliges us to reconsider the question of authenticity. This requires not only the analysis of the material, but also the ontological and axiological spheres, through an interdisciplinary approach involving philosophy and ethics as well as the theory and practice of conservation. This paper presents the characteristics that define the identity and needs of one of the most unconventional modes of expression within contemporary art: installations. Also included is a proposition of a model for the analysis, diagnosis and treatment of such artworks, and an innovative semiotic system of research to recognize the significance of the material elements which have an impact on subsequent conservation.

RÉSUMÉ

La conservation-restauration et la préservation de l'art moderne et contemporain pour les générations futures représentent un vrai défi à notre époque. L'extrême variété des moyens d'expression employés ne permet pas l'application de règles de routine testées et éprouvées, tandis que la nature des œuvres nous oblige à reconsidérer la question de l'authenticité. Outre l'analyse des matériaux, les sphères ontologiques et axiologiques sont abordées, via une approche interdisciplinaire qui engage la philosophie et la déontologie au même titre que la théorie et la pratique de la conservation-restauration. Cet article présente les caractéristiques qui définissent l'identité et les besoins d'un des modes d'ex-

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL HERITAGE

Over the centuries, the process of creating art underwent a progressive improvement in its technical and technological principles and the faithful adherence to these was a guarantee of permanence. But cultural changes generated new needs for artistic expression. Beside the traditional modes, new forms of art came into being, breaking away from the customary artistic disciplines in the sphere of ideas and their representation, as well as in their technology, materials used and durability. Different values have been given to the relationships between the tangible and intangible elements of the artwork.

Installation art, which for several decades has been one of the main currents of the visual arts, is one area where all these changes have found expression. It is an open form, which transcends existing rules and habits both in the ontological and material spheres. Preservation, care and conservation of such contingent heritage pose a great challenge to its stakeholders. Conservators of modern and contemporary art still have a feeling of “flying blind” with no established rules and “paved roads for how to do things” (Fountain 2010). The preservation and conservation of such complex art gives rise to many dilemmas. Some of them are technical, but many of them must be considered from the ethical and philosophical points of view. In particular, innovations are needed in the interpretation of the factors conditioning the value of an artwork and the guiding principle behind conservation: authenticity.

ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY

The concept of the authenticity of a work of art has throughout the centuries conditioned the form of its preservation as cultural heritage, on the basis of which successive generations evaluate their history. In the 20th century, on the basis of experience in conservation, principles were established according to which the original material possessed an absolute value. In Europe, this was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition connected with the cult of the relics of the saints. Conservation was aimed at preserving and prolonging the life of the unique physical object admitted to be a work of art, by means of delaying or preventing any changes or possible intrusion into its structure. After the ages of destruction, this seemed to be the most proper, and only, way to preserve

pression les moins conventionnels dans l'art contemporain : les installations. Il propose également un modèle pour l'analyse, le diagnostic et le traitement de ce type d'œuvres d'art, ainsi qu'un système sémiotique de recherche innovant pour reconnaître l'importance des éléments matériels ayant un impact sur leur conservation future.

RESUMEN

La conservación y preservación de arte moderno y contemporáneo para las generaciones futuras se ha convertido en un verdadero reto de nuestro tiempo. La enorme variedad de medios de expresión utilizados no permite la aplicación de reglas probadas que se aplican de manera rutinaria, sino que su carácter nos obliga a reconsiderar la cuestión de la autenticidad. Esto requiere no solamente el análisis del material, sino también de las esferas ontológicas y axiológicas, a través de un acercamiento interdisciplinario que implique filosofía y ética, además de la teoría y práctica de la conservación. Este artículo presenta las características que definen la identidad y las necesidades de uno de los modos menos convencionales de expresión dentro del arte contemporáneo: las instalaciones. También incluye una propuesta de modelo para el análisis, diagnóstico y tratamiento de este tipo de obras de arte, y un innovador sistema de investigación semiótico para reconocer la relevancia de los elementos materiales que tienen un impacto en la posterior conservación.

the identity of cultural heritage. More recently, an excessively narrowly defined approach has provoked worldwide discussions on the topic of authenticity. Contact and exchange with other cultures has revealed different needs and importance. The cultural identities of objects made of non-durable materials, constantly exposed to earthquakes or unstable atmospheric conditions, were related to the protection of form, function and tradition. This was recognized and accepted by the World Heritage Cultural institutions in the form of the so-called *Document of Authenticity* (Nara 1994). This was not the end. Reflections on the care of cultural heritage needed to be enriched by consideration of something that was extremely important for many forms of culture all over the world – the intangible and contextual aspects (Paris 2003).

Why should the broader approaches of conservation policies in different communities and nations be noticed in the case of unconventional forms of contemporary art? Paradoxically, in the era of globalisation, the answer is diversity. This can explain the necessity of reassessing the issue of authenticity. The new interpretation of authenticity is especially apparent in installations. Why? Because of a huge diversity in the approach to the concept, matter and preservation of the object. The aim here is to preserve the identity of the object and not petrify the picture in a single moment of the material state (Laurenson 2006) which would negate the ideological sense of the work and the original impact on the viewer.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INSTALLATION ART

New approaches that influence conservation decisions are the result of the unique character of installation art (Jadzinska 2010). Installations are a hybrid of forms, issues and meanings. They integrate different media and objects (for example ready-mades), space and place, contexts, new technologies and sensual elements to form a whole. They may be created for a specific place and time as a specific arrangement associated with a specific (spatial, geographical, political or historical) context, or – in contrast – they may be mobile forms which capitalise on change. The material sphere becomes the carrier of a certain idea and as such ceases to be important in its own right. Many works of installation art express the idea of transience, and in such cases the material is just a substance through which a story is told through the observation of a process. Here it is the relativities and confrontation between individual elements of the work, or the whole complex in relation to other objects or the spaces in which the work is located, which are of importance. Supplementary to this, sometimes the whole rationale of the work may be sensory elements (for example scent, warmth, light) which directly affect the senses of the viewer. The physical and psychological involvement of the viewer becomes an integral part of the work. The contingent and ephemeral character and variety of approaches to material and idea result from the genealogy of this current in art. It developed from avant-garde art, above all the

experiments of the futurists, constructivists, Dadaists and surrealists. Its history refers to the whole of 20th-century European art, the creativity of El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s, environment and happening in the late 1950s, minimalist sculpture and conceptualism in the 1960s. From the 1970s, installations became the most widespread form of visual arts and at the same time the one most widely accepted by cultural institutions (Bishop 2005).

NEW NEEDS AND CHALLENGES. PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aims and needs of modern protection and conservation of this kind of art are different in comparison with traditional art. The identity of installation art is as connected with dependence on space, time, process, contexts, as changes in the approach to the material elements. Intangible elements and the new role of the viewer place these works in the domain of performing art. “Complex” art must be analysed in a complex way and this requires interdisciplinarity (Constantine 1998). Let us try to use philosophical and semiotic considerations to diagnose these new needs and challenges.

The analysis of a work of art is connected with understanding the nature it possesses from the moment of its creation and which is then affected by all the stages of its physical execution. In these processes, the role of “co-creator” is played by the context, internal and external factors and finally the viewer. All these spheres interact creating an unrepeatable combination of meanings. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) considering the problem of the ontology of works of art claimed that the uniqueness of a work of art becomes evident through its double meaning. This dichotomy is contained in the relation between the idea, which defines the whole combination of meanings (*die Welt*), and the matter of a work (*die Erde*). Both of the terms are inextricably bound, and at the same time there is some sort of constant tension between them (Heidegger 1950). The phenomenological understanding of a work of art was developed by Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) who claimed that an artwork is constructed in the form of layers, consisting of a set of integrated levels. The material sphere is important but it is still only a physical foundation. In order to get through the matter to the actual work of art, it is essential to “leap” to the higher level, focus on the perception of the work as an intentional object. It is indeed an intentional self, as it contains numerous underdetermined places and potential moments. Its realisation, that is, “supplementation” of those places, takes place only at the level of perception by the receiver (Ingarden 1970). The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) drew attention to the issue of the perception of a work of art by a viewer through a process of individual and complex experiencing of it. This perception is not treated as passive contemplation, but as “belonging” to the work, presence (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

NEW STRATEGIES FOR CARE, PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION

How does this influence conservation research? The complexity of the work of art highlighted by philosophy must be recognised by the conservator, who should then not conserve the work's material structure for its own sake, but as a carrier of the meaning it embodies. The huge degree of individuality in the appearance, media and concepts in installation art, as well as the understanding of the dichotomy of the work with its concept, tangible and intangible elements and the viewer's new role, must be considered in strategies of care, conservation, re-installation and documentation. This implies that we should adopt a three-way strategy for the protection of works of installation art: 1. the analysis of the "anatomy" of an artwork (tangible aspects – *die Erde*) – reflection of the significance of material and changes in the thinking about its permanence and preservation; 2. recognizing its intangible spheres – *die Welt* (concept, context, relativity of spatial relationships, sensory elements, a new approach to space, place and presence); 3. establishing a strategy of interpretation and conservation measures. Among these are conservation-restoration processes carried out directly on the object (including the replacement of degraded or lost elements), as well as a whole range of activities that go beyond the original: the creation of replica, reconstruction, emulation or documentation. Other activities involving interpretation, presentation, re-enactment and re-installation are more connected with the conceptual sphere, though in practice they have a marked effect on the physical form of the work. The necessity for analysis, diagnosis and treatment with regard to all of those factors leads to the changing and expanding of the role of the artist and conservator (INCCA).¹

In order to preserve the authenticity of the individual spheres of a work, we sometimes have to step outside the traditional dogmas of the discipline of conservation. The problem of the limits of the ethics of conservation must be confronted with the specific nature of installation art (Weyer 2006). The most controversial is the first point connected with the analysis of the anatomy of the artwork and proper interpretation of the significance of matter.

A contemporary artwork constitutes a point of reference for the transmission of various kinds of codes and communicative conventions. They function as a set of mutually influential signs referring to particular codes. A change of matter, or otherwise – the lack of a demanded change – may cause the falsification of their perception as signs and ruin the system. How to correctly recognize which part should be preserved? Of course we can, and should, ask the author (in the form of professional interviews), but sometime this alone is not sufficient. Each case study of an installation is completely different in terms of approach to the appearance, media and concepts. It is impossible to establish hard rules, only to indicate the direction and methodology.

PROPOSITION OF INNOVATIVE INTERPRETIVE MODEL

I propose adopting a system based on the theories of semiology expounded by the American logician/philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1857–1913). The material elements of a work of art might be iconic or index signs (all are symbolic signs in fact). This differentiation will be crucial for determining the manner adopted for its preservation. The American art theoretician Rosalind Krauss defined as indices those signs which determine the significance on an axis of physical relationship to their point of reference, and thus an indication of specific things, events or experience to which the object refers (Krauss 1977). Material can be an index sign in the same way as the papillary lines are the index of an individual. In this case, its preservation is crucial, due to the hidden meaning, and its individual and specific character does not allow it to be removed or reduced. Alternately, when the material is treated as an iconic sign, merely representing a given type of material or object, it may then – as such – be replaced, reconstructed or emulated.

CASE STUDIES

Both of the types of signs mentioned are present, for example, in the work *Still life* by Koji Kamoji (Figure 1). His conceptual artworks are usually connected with the arrangement of a few but “special” physical elements in a distinct relationship with space and the viewer (Figure 2). In this example, many different objects displayed on four tables could be reached by arch-shaped bent strips of aluminium sheet, which constituted “tools to carry the voice of things”. Therefore, it could be assumed that in order to preserve this voice of things, it is necessary to preserve the objects in an unchanged condition. However, the decision concerning their preservation or reconstruction lies in the iconography of a given element, and this can vary.

The first group is made up by objects intentionally unchanged in their physical form, for which the meaning is related to a historically important moment in the artist’s life (letters, sheets of music, notes, photos). They are an index, a “physical manifestation” of the presence of something that has left a trace. The preservation of an authentic structure and the matter must be the main goal of restoration activity. The second group is constituted by objects whose meaning is connected with emphasising certain processes. It is the apple going through subsequent phases of natural decaying, or water and earth underlining the relationship with the place through each single exchange. In order to maintain the authenticity of an idea, one must act outside the dogmas of conservation, which order the preservation of the original matter and a minimal intervention into the object’s material.

In another artwork by Kamoji (*Evening. Reed Boats*, Krakow, 2008), the effect of an immaculate surface is assured by his stipulation that the plate of iron must be exchanged every subsequent exhibition (Figure 3). This time, the material is important only as an ingardenian “physical



Figure 1

The artist’s approach to the durability of particular elements is steered by the concept of the whole work. Koji Kamoji’s *Still Life*, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, 2003. Photo: M. Michalski

Figure 2

This conceptual artwork is connected with the proper arrangement of a few but peculiar physical elements in a proper relationship with space, as well as life outside and inside. Koji Kamoji’s *Still Life*, fragment, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, 2003. Photo: M. Michalski



Figure 3

The material as an iconic sign can be replaced. Koji Kamoji's *Evening. Reed Boats*, Starmach Gallery, Krakow, 2008, Photo: Archive of the artist

Figure 4

The matter treated as an index sign must be preserved. Koji Kamoji, interview with the artist in his studio, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: M. Jadzinska

foundation”, as an iconic sign providing the impression of the ideal, an undisturbed plane in which other elements, architecture and the viewer, are reflected. As distinct from symbols, the other elements, having their own, unrepeatable character and history, should be preserved and used again. For example, stones taken from places important for the artist (the historical, religious and personal context) are treated as index signs establishing their meaning in relation to their references (Figure 4).

Iconic signs could be helpful in the interpretation of preservation problems in conceptual art. In the installations of Stanisław Dróżdź, an artist creating conceptual art and poetry, the arrangement of some elements, space and light creates a feeling of mystery that is crucial when we peep into a strange, duchampian room (*Concrete Poetry*, Warsaw, 2002) or walk through the “immaterial” cube (*Między/Between*, 1977/2008) (Figures 5–6). Matter (thread, printed letters) is not a unique physical object but the tool to enable the process of the individual and complex experience of “belonging” to the work by the viewer. That is why there were eight versions of his leading installation *Między* relating to the space. The authenticity of the matter is not relevant here, but the authenticity of intangible aspects like spatial relations, colour contrasts, light and place connected with presence that evoke certain experiences are really important. The idea was to provoke a game with the viewer to get his active participation and all the rest then fell into line.

Another work by Dróżdź, *Two words*, included several plates exhibited in a certain spatial arrangement. There was a cycle of plates with a paper glued into a slice of zinc-plated metal with the text printed on it. Evidence of degradation in the form of permanently integrated brown drips have appeared on the surface of the paper due to age and possible poor storage conditions. It was impossible to remove them, but it was also impossible to leave them as they heavily interfered with the idea of the work. The artist's concept was to show words, black on a white background, nothing else. Emulation, the process of recreating the work to keep it alive, was the only way to expose the artwork in accordance with the artist's intension. What was important was the artist's gesture in the conceptual and not manual sphere.

Objects or substances may be a reference point in space and time by which the artist makes his presence using the index sign. Mirosław Bałka attaches great importance to the message in the process of individual, complex and spiritual experience. To achieve this, he uses materials or elements with regard to their internal, inseparable meaning. The materials of his works are highly significant but not in a traditional manner – he obliges people who are responsible for his works to change some of them and preserve others, but only with his acceptance. Even conifer needles spilled on the floor must be preserved and reused. They have their own iconography as they came from the tree that was growing in front of the artist's family home (which later became his studio) and was cut down by his father. Bałka does not treat them as replaceable ready-mades but

as an index sign of his memory, documents of presence and “papillary lines” of personal history. In contrast, salt should be replaced at every new exhibition, as an iconic sign symbolising purity, tears and sweat. The conservation treatment of artworks including such elements must be directed by the significance of the object or material concerned.

CONCLUSION

Each conservation treatment, or lack thereof, is an “act of criticism” as Cesare Brandi put it (Brandi 1963), which leads to the creation of a new aesthetic quality, and therefore involves great responsibility. In the case of installation art, the interdisciplinary research connected with materials science, philosophy and ethics, linked with manual and technical skills and “vivid contact” with the artwork and its author, is needed. Basing on it, we will be able to rethink the concept of authenticity, which has an influence on the decision concerning the form and method of its preservation. In the theory and practice of conservation, the paradigm of preserving the original material of the artwork must be supplemented by the issue of diversity in approach to the conceptual, tangible and intangible aspects of the artwork. The identity of installation art must be recognised by the proper dependence between the conceptual and material spheres. The proposed semiotic model of interpretation can be useful in recognising this.

Should we really take such care of this strange, unconventional art and its future? As the great British economist John Maynard Keynes said, “in the long run we’re all dead,” so who cares? Conservators do. And their decisions determine whether the identity of contemporary art will survive. Preserving the impossible should become possible.

NOTES

- ¹ INCCA – International Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art. The platform for gathering and sharing knowledge in this field: www.incca.org.

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Figure 5

Installation by Stanisław Dróżdż, *Concrete Poetry (fishing lines)*, CSW, Warsaw, 2002. Photo: M. Jadzinska

Figure 6

Installation by Stanisław Dróżdż, *Między/ Between*, Appendix2 Gallery, Warsaw, 1977/2008. Photo: M. Jadzinska

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