

Cesare Brandi's *Theory of restoration*: some principles discussed in relation with the conservation of Contemporary Art

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This paper concerns the relationship between Cesare Brandi's Theory of Restoration and the problem of restoring objects of contemporary art.

Cesare Brandi's *Theory of Restoration*, which was written in the 1940's and 1950's, and published in 1963, did not contemplate non-traditional works of art. He was instead considering pictorial works on canvas and wood, frescoes, archeological pieces; works of art whose expressive end was in some sense clear and related to its constituent materials by the artist. Its function was formal communication, through images.

The contemporary work of art, with Duchamp and the ready-made, radically changed this situation: the visual manifestation, that which we perceive of a work, non longer corresponds to the manual know-how of the artist, but rather to the exposure of a concept, an idea. The creative process, now approaching architecture, resides in the project, which expresses itself as a sensible object. Contemporary art considers as well the use of any and all “materials”: synthetic, organic, mechanical, digital, along with different forms of exposition, ranging from emptiness, an absence of material, to the accumulation of the same as a work in and of itself. Brandi's theory is a theoretical-philosophical text and not a step-by-step manual. It bases itself upon just a few fundamental concepts which I will here confront with some of the problems facing the conservation of contemporary art, limiting them to works which are constituted as objects.

The methodological moment of recognizing a work of art

Brandi defines restoration as the “the methodological moment of recognizing a work of art”: it is an instantaneous appropriation in which consciousness of the observer recognizes an object as a work of art, separated from objects of common use. Restoration is in fact a critical act of separation, or, as Brandi indicates, an act of discernment. It is a critical act of interpretation which is generated by the perception of the object within its sensibility, that is to say, within its physical and material consistency.

Regarding the contemporary art object, this first act of perceiving the work, its recognition and interpretation, is perhaps even more necessary than that applied to a traditional work of art. The contemporary art object invokes us to recognition and interpretation. The classic, painted tablet, a typical brandian example, proposes and exposes itself as a work of art: from the

moment of the Ready-made the contemporary art object asks of the observer an act of recognition that it is itself which makes it constitute a work of art. The Ready-made, an object of common use, transfers the creative moment of the artist from realization to the pure conceptualization of the work, investing materials of common use with symbolic meaning. The ready made also contrasts the uniqueness of the work of art through repetition in series, made up of similar objects, over the course of many years. The Ready-made opens the door to conceptual art and to the use of any material in artistic production.

For Brandi the recognition of a work of art is an awareness of a physical, material consistency. He describes material as that “which serves the epiphany of the image”. He also distinguishes a material structure and a material appearance, while retaining that these two elements are indivisible. The material as structure supports the material as appearance: in a tablet the structure is the wood panel, the appearance is the picture which transmits the image. The appearance can be defined as that which is visible of the material, which does not coincide with the image of a work of art. Brandi also states that: “one restores only the material of a work of art”, and that the material is composed as well by its being viewed, by the air, by light: the material of a work of art does not coincides with the materials of which it is composed. This concept is fundamental for the restoration of contemporary art.

Many aspects of international studies on the restoration of contemporary art have concentrated on the specific decay of single materials, often experimental, synthetic and unpredictable: this aspect of scientific study is necessary for the solution of specific technical problems. The theoretical problem we are facing today is not what are the materials of contemporary art but what is the material, in the Brandian sense, of a contemporary work of art, and therefore what is the “material which must be restored”.

The material of a contemporary work is often an idea.

The contemporary work of art includes and experiments with all kinds of materials, which do not have any value per se, but for the significance which the artist attributes to it. This modifies its relationship to time. Where, in a traditional work a will to endure was implicit, and the materials used were related to time by acknowledging it, to the degree that Brandi faced conservation problems as maintaining the “patina” of a work, the contemporary work of art does not always foresee its own decay and therefore it poses different requirements for the materials of which it is composed and to conservationists.

Let us look at a few examples.

A work which responds well to the criteria.

An “Achrome” by Piero Manzoni (1933-1966) associated the poetics of the “Nul-Gruppe”: acrylic colors, cotton, caolin, and bread. Its aspect, intended by the artist, is that of the absence of color: time passes and the decay of the materials assembled in an experimental manner render the work yellow, or create gaps. For Brandi every work carries with it an

esthetical case and a historical case: the first concerns the communicative intent of the artist, that which the artist wish to be seen, the second contains the time that has passed since the production of the work and its entrance into our conscience. For Brandi this time passed is not to be cancelled: but, Brandi says the esthetic instance should prevail over the historical instance. A work of absolute white, if it becomes yellow, no longer expresses its esthetical instance. One may discuss whether to keep the work's "patina", its historical instance or to remove it, respecting the artist's intention for the work to be achromatic, without color (its esthetic instance). For Brandi the various "patinas" should be discussed case by case.

(see: www.archiviomanzoni.org)

Distinguishing structural material and appearance material.

"Maternity" 1965 (The city gallery of modern and contemporary art of Rome), by Pino Pascali, an Italian exponent of Arte Povera: at the time of its first exposition, in 1965, this work suffered damage which led to it being disowned by its author and rendered a "lost" work, until the moment of its restoration undertaken by the ICR between 1997 and 2000.

The work is composed of a wooden frame into which is inserted a rubber beach ball, which originally supported a cotton fabric, filling it up as if it were the belly of a pregnant woman. The ball, which exploded in fact before the first exposition, had rendered the fabric similar to a classical drapery, totally transforming the work's significance. In a brandian reading, the material as structure in the work is constituted of the fabric and the ball; the material as appearance is the pregnant belly within the intention of the artist. At the moment of restoration, it was decided the deflated ball should be replaced by a new one of the same kind, a beach ball, based on the existing photographic documentation of the work's initial appearance, and on the consideration that maintaining the original ball would compromise the reading of the materials appearance, altering its significance. The new ball supported the original canvas, which, by being filled in, had taken on the form which it had not had for years. Brandi says that the structure may be sacrificed in favor of the appearance.

However there are cases where the difference between the durability of the material and the materiality of the work of art, in the brandian sense of material as a "vehicle for an images epiphany", imposes more complex conservation and interpretative choices.

Take, for example, Arte Povera, which used natural and industrial materials in virtue of their accessibility and everyday nature, attributing to them a sense of playfulness, or a sense of manifestation of pure existence or, in the words of Massimo Carboni, Italian philosopher, a sense of "undefined event". Pascali in 1968, the year of his death, created "Liane", "Reti", and "Cesti" from iron scrub brushes for washing dishes: the fate of these works regarding their communication and their conservation greatly depends on their respective, current placements. "L'Arco di Ulisse", 1968, in the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome, is composed of iron scrub brushes on wood: having been on exposition for a long time in the museum, in a consistent climatic condition, has slowed the work's rusting. "La tela di Penelope" (Penelope's

tapestry) (1968), in the same museum, left in storage for years and made of the same scrub brushes, is today no longer displayable. The documentation tells us that Pascali created his “nets” (reti) playing with some friends in the kitchen, just before the Venice Biennale of 1968. One may ask if the material of Pascali’s work is in those specific scrub brushes or in the idea itself of the canvas?

The proposal for creating replicas of contemporary works of art is central to the international debate on this theme. Again Pino Pascali, “Campi arati” in the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome: a work from 1968, originally composed of panels of eternit, (a toxic material), iron tubs with colored water. This work was not displayed in the last Pascali exhibition in the museum itself (2005), for the health hazard of its constituent materials.

The Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, The Netherland, on the occasion of a Pascali exposition in 1991, reproduced with new materials the “Ploughed fields and irrigation canals” (Campi arati e canali di irrigazione”, a work from 1968 owned by the museum), originally made also of eternit , earth and iron tubs with colored water. For Brandi the copy makes no sense if not for educational and documentary purposes. A fake is inadmissible. The choice of the Dutch museum to substitute materials is, in effect, an educational one, which does not pretend to present the “original” work by Pascali, but interprets his creative intention and wholly renders the image.

(see: <http://www.icr.beniculturali.it/Convegni/Gcam/gcam0.htm>; www.gnam.beniculturali.it)

Substitution

The recognition of a work of art as the first action in restoration is confirmed as the foundation of every restoration in other cases of substitution.

The “Seat with fat” (1963) by Josef Beuys, is an example of the use of symbolic materials in works where the appearance and the structure of the materials are not distinguishable. The appearance of the fat coincides with its being fat. Conservation choices which presumed to render only the appearance of the fat without its true substance have proven to be mistaken.

An example of a “work with fat” by Beuys which I may examine is the “Corner of fat” by Josef Beuys (1963) in the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam.

“In the summer of 1977 the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam decided to exhibit a work by Joseph Beuys called “Corner of Fat in Cardboard Box”, made in 1963. The work consisted of a battered corrugated cardboard box containing in one corner a piece of gray felt covered with a layer of ivory-colored animal fat. Because animal fat putrefies and smells bad, the museum kept the piece in a Plexiglas container, which served to protect both it and museum visitors. Corner of Fat was unwisely exhibited under a spotlight, which made it very hot inside the box. Pretty soon the fat melted dramatically, spreading into the felt and the cardboard, making it look dirty and greasy. When the Plexiglas container was opened, the smell was terrible.

Although Beuys was still alive, he wasn't consulted. Instead, the Stedelijk's conservator decided to reconstitute Corner of Fat himself, using a mixture of stearin, linseed oil, and beeswax.

The museum's present conservator, Herman Aben, says :`In my opinion, what was done in 1977 was both too drastic and unnecessary" and points out that the artist accepted deterioration and decay. "The processes continue autonomously," Beuys wrote. "Everything changes.""¹

The "restored" "Corner of Fat in Cardboard Box" is not a replica of the original with similar materials, nor is it a fake and it is neither a new work, but it is a lost work, because its esthetic instance does not reside obviously in how it appears but in how the fat assumes a symbolic value from the poetic and personal experiences of Beuys.

In the museum of Contemporary Art in Hamburg a "Window-showcase" of 1981 collect "relics" which testify to Beuys "actions", among them the fat from the action "Der Chef – The Boss" (1964) and wax from the action "Eurasia" (1966). The window was conceived by the artist as part of a path which includes the memory of the creative process as a creative act in itself, and the pieces it contains were left to their own natural decomposition.

The TATE Gallery of London assumed the same attitude with respect to its "Fat Battery" (1963) by Josef Beuys which, precisely because of its dubious durability, underwent a lengthy and difficult procedure of acquisition. Rachel Barker and Alison Bracker of the TATE Gallery say: "When Beuys visited the Tate in 1984 and witnessed the effects of twenty years of ageing upon *Fat Battery*, he was pleased to note the small changes that had taken place. The fat had changed form, appearing to be more liquid, had bleached in color, and had flowed from its original position within the metal container, saturating the cardboard outer container. It was also odorous, cracked, and had absorbed dirt from the environment. Despite these changes, Beuys exclaimed, 'The fat should last as long as the Pharaohs,' and remarked approvingly that *Fat Battery* now smelt exactly like an old battery."²

¹ Sylvia Hochfield , *Sticks and stones and lemon cough drops*,
http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=1183; Art news 2002 september
Kees Herman Aben, *Conservation of Modern Sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam*, Tate Gallery Conference, 1995

² RACHEL BARKER AND ALISON BRACKER, *Beuys is Dead: Long Live Beuys!*
Characterising Volition, Longevity, and Decision-Making in the Work of Joseph Beuys; Tate Papers Autumn 2005 © Rachel Barker and Alison Bracker; Rachel Barker is a Conservator of Modern and Contemporary Paintings at Tate. Dr. Alison Bracker is Co-Founder and Co-Director of Bracker Fiske Consultants.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05autumn/barker.htm>

This case clarifies how the interpretation of the artist's intention and the recognition of the work can radically modify the identification of the appearance and the material to conserve. The appearance of the material may not necessarily coincide with the material to be conserved.

Alberto Burri, an Informal Italian artist who experimented with many new materials from the 1950's to the 1990's, put to use a particular mix of glue and "caolino" in the 1970's in order to realize his "Cretti", on tablets, which displayed the crystallization of a process of cracking in action. His works, though composed of experimental materials, have a "traditional" structural form, a support and a surface: regarding the work's durability Burri declared that "there will be nothing left a hundred years from now", but his work is constitutionally conceived to last.

In 2007 Michel Blazy realized "Post patman" in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, a complex installation of living, organic material in continuous change. Blazy stated that his work spoke of "life and death" and "the major part of the things I make are not to last". "Mur qui pèle" is a wall smeared with flour, cooked rice and water: it is a "cretto" in its makeup and it is its natural fate to disappear. The catalog indicates that the work is from 1998, and it is currently in the private collection Pierre Huber, Geneva: the collector acquired the project, and the work may be shown by redoing it as an original. In this case the work is a concluded creative process for the artist, in 1998, and the materials of which it is composed each time, do not coincide with the *material* of which it is composed. This comparison shows how the appearance of the work does not coincide with its restoration solutions: the material of Burri's "Cretto" require conservation, Blazy's wall not only passes away, but it is repeatable, it is an idea which is realized through substitutable materials, through the action of the artist but also through the continuous intervention of other subjects. This can be seen in the installation "Champ de pomme de terre" (The potato field), dated 2002, and reproposed in 2007, composed of potato flakes, constantly "restored" by the workers of the Palais de Tokyo.

(see: www.fondazioneburri.org; <http://www.evene.fr/arts/actualite/interview-michel-blazy-chocopoules-patman-tokyo-539.php>; www.palaisdetokyo.com)

Time and the work of Art

The time for a work of art for Brandi is divided into three parts. The first is the "duration" of the creative process, conducted by the artist, a time which closes with the realization of the work, that is to say closed and concluded. The "interval" is the historical time which passes for the work up to the present. The "moment" of a work of art's recognition as such by the consciousness of the observer (who takes on the responsibility of transmitting it to the future). Restoration occurs exclusively in the third time, it does not cancel historical time (the interval) nor does it re-activate the creative process, if not to create a fake, or a new work, if undertaken by the author himself.

The creative process in contemporary art works is anything but concluded and requires continual intervention, interpretation and creative integration for curators and spectators.

Brandi approaches contemporary art through the work of Alberto Burri and speaks of contemporary art as the “end of the future” and of the “integration of the spectator”. These concepts approach the idea of the “open work” proposed by Umberto Eco, though not emulating it, and anticipates the theoretical development of brandian ideas that would be confronted with French Structuralism, in his writings following the Theory of Restoration, “Sign and image” (1960), “The two paths” (1966) and above all “The General Theory of criticism” (1974).

The creative process is closed, the work is open.

Restoration, according to Brandi’s vision, is a relationship between the observer and the work, which does not take into account the artist, because usually in the works that Brandi examined the artists have been dead for centuries: restoration is therefore an interpretative process which holds within the work and in the awareness of the observer its answers.

Let us consider works such as the “Stone that eats” (1968) by Gianni Anselmo, at the Pompidou Center in Paris or “Milkstones” by Wolfgang Laib (from 1971). These works require continuous, daily substitutions which correspond to the will of the artist and also result from the nature of the work itself, which is an open process. The lettuce and milk are, in brandian terms, structural material but also appearance, and to substitute them signifies a respect for the work and not an invasion of the creative process but the “methodological” recognition of the work itself.

The examples that I have analyzed refer to the relationship between the image of a work of art and easily corrupted materials. I have not examined cases of substitution of mechanical parts as in the neon of Dan Flavin, in so far as the nature of the material-structure of the mechanical parts in relation to the appearance of the work is easily identifiable. The examples taken from the world of organic materials demonstrates instead how in the contemporary work the significance has delocalized with respect to an original material and how it still expresses itself in material. “Only the material of a work of art is to be restored” and the definition of “restoration as a critical act” by Cesare Brandi show themselves to be fruitful principles for reflecting on the interpretation of contemporary art.

<http://www.scultura-italiana.com/Biografie/Anselmo.htm>

http://www.teleculture.com/archive/2005_01_01_TCarchive.html

(see also: www.cesarebrandi.org ; www.incca.org)

Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration* (trad. Cynthia Rockwell; rev. Dorothy Bell; cur. Giuseppe Basile) Firenze (Nardini), 2005

Cesare Brandi, *Theorie der Restaurierung* (trad. Ursula Schädler-Saub, Dörthe Jakobs), Muenchen (Siegl), 2006

Cesare Brandis „Teoria del restauro“ und die Restaurierung in Deutschland heute

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