

## Theoretical issues in the conservation of contemporary art: on paradigms, ontological and constitutive elements in some practical cases

Rosario Llamas-Pacheco<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article provides an approach to some of the theoretical concepts necessary to deal with the conservation and restoration of contemporary art. In this sense, the status of four contemporary works after their restoration, or simply due to the passage of time, has been analysed in depth and from a theoretical point of view. The works chosen were made of chocolate; plastics such as latex, acrylic resins and epoxy; organic materials such as blood; liturgical fabrics; butterfly wings; natural flowers... all materials that degrade due to the natural passage of time and the effect of the agents of deterioration.

The interesting thing about the work is that it establishes the need to situate each work of contemporary art in an appropriate paradigm before proposing a process of intervention. To do this, it is necessary to carry out a study of the constituent elements of the artworks, both material and immaterial. Furthermore, the study presents the different intervention processes carried out.

Finally, we study how the state of conservation may have affected the consistency of the artwork, taking into account the artistic intention.

**Keywords:** conservation of contemporary art; paradigm; experience; essence; ontological status.

### [es] Cuestiones teóricas en la conservación del arte contemporáneo: sobre paradigmas y elementos ontológicos y constitutivos en algunos casos prácticos

**Resumen.** El artículo realiza una aproximación a algunos conceptos teóricos necesarios para abordar la conservación y restauración del arte contemporáneo. En este sentido, se ha analizado en profundidad desde un punto de vista teórico, el status de cuatro obras contemporáneas después de su restauración, o simplemente debido al paso del tiempo. Las obras elegidas han sido realizadas en chocolate; plásticos como el látex, resinas acrílicas y epoxi; materiales orgánicos como la sangre; tejidos litúrgicos; alas de mariposa; flores naturales... todos ellos, materiales que se degradan por el paso natural del tiempo y el efecto de los agentes de deterioro.

Lo interesante del trabajo es que establece la necesidad de situar cada obra de arte contemporáneo en un paradigma adecuado antes de proponer un proceso de intervención. Para ello, es necesario realizar un estudio de los elementos constitutivos de las obras de arte, tanto materiales como inmateriales. El estudio, además presenta los distintos procesos de intervención llevados a cabo.

Por último, se estudia cómo el estado de conservación puede haber afectado a la consistencia de la obra, teniendo en cuenta la intención artística.

**Palabras clave:** conservación de arte contemporáneo; paradigma; experimentación; esencia; estatus ontológico.

<sup>1</sup> Universitat Politècnica de València  
Email: [rllamas@crbc.upv.es](mailto:rllamas@crbc.upv.es)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1238-1555>

**Summary:** 1. Introducción. 2. Research aim. 3. Some previous theoretical concepts. 4. A case of intervention included in the paradigm of scientific restoration. 5. A case of intervention included in the paradigm of the procesual. 6. A type of artistic production included in the paradigm of performance and “something else”: the work of Hermann Nistch and its relation to conservation. 7. Artworks situated in the paradigm of the death of the artwork. 8. Conclusions. References.

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## 1. Introduction

The discipline of conservation and restoration of contemporary art has undergone a very important theoretical evolution and deepening in recent years. The need to conserve for the future the artworks that today constitute our cultural heritage, has pushed the conservator to an intense debate in order to specify the definition of the theoretical concepts that most affect his profession (Beerens 2016; Hólling 2017; Scott 2016). There are numerous types of artworks that make up the contemporary artistic heritage, from video art, to performance. Fortunately for the conservator, on most occasions the work arrives defined as such before the intervention process, although not only artworks are conserved: numerous artefacts can be considered worthy of conservation because they possess affectivities and values that have been granted by the different social agents (Muñoz 2003).

In any case, if the objective of conservation is to transmit the artworks to the future, conservators, from a phenomenological point of view, must be able to facilitate the correct experience of them, otherwise we would be affecting their Truth-authenticity. Truth is understood as an inherent property of being, a property that constitutes its authenticity according to Heidegger (2005)<sup>2</sup>. In relation to the loss of authenticity, the passage of time is a fundamental factor, since it brings with it the change of the matter due to its degradation or substitution; it brings with it the forgetting of conceptual or social aspects, and even changes in the artistic intention. The conservator of contemporary art must attend to and manage the constant, inevitable mutation, so that this loss of authenticity does not occur.

## 2. Research aim

This article aims to serve as a theoretical example in front of the need to conserve a contemporary artwork. It compares the ontological status of several artworks, before

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<sup>2</sup> In relation to the concept of Truth-authenticity, an initial clarification is in order. As conservators, we feel a responsibility to bequeath to the future the works of art that constitute our current heritage and help shape our cultural identity. But in order to bequeath them correctly, without undermining what they truly are, we need to know their Truth. According to Heidegger, the Truth of the entity, of our work of art in this case, should be understood as a property inherent to it, and constitutes authenticity itself. The possibility of attaining knowledge of this absolute truth has also been questioned. Nevertheless, our position throughout the article will be to attempt the maximum approximation to the knowledge of that Truth through the profound study of all the constituent planes of the work of art.

and after the intervention, in order to determine whether the entity is still what it really was before the beginning of the degradation.

The purpose of this article is to analyse in depth how to deal with the conservation of several artworks situated in different paradigms. It is a specific objective to study the intervention processes carried out on them, but not focusing on the technical part, which will necessarily be provided, but on the theoretical issues. Therefore, for each practical case, it will be determined in which paradigm the work should be included (Llamas 2020); which are the essential elements that constitute it (Zubiri 1962), both in the material and intangible spheres; what order of importance they occupy in relation to the artistic intention and the consistency of the work; and how the degradation of the material part affects the conceptual framework of the artworks, modifying or not their ontological status.

### **3. On paradigms, ontological and constitutive elements in contemporary art**

The need to address the unexpected problems that the works were posing to restorers led to the study of numerous concepts whose definition and adaptation to our field was necessary. Therefore, we will now reflect on some of these theoretical concepts in an attempt to approach them from this perspective.

As conservators, we are faced with the need to bequeath the works of art in front of us to the future through restoration and preventive conservation. Our work of art exists. It is an entity that can be perceived. On his part, existence is an ontological category that makes possible and gives rise to the perceptions we obtain of a given entity: for something to be perceived it must exist. In turn, the experiences we attain through these perceptions, once rationally analysed, construct our knowledge of the entity. However, there are authors who have argued for overcoming anthropocentrism in this case (Harman 2017). Harman argues that phenomenology has shortcomings, as it approaches the study of objects as always subject to their use or relationship with human beings, while defending an autonomous existence of these objects. This author rejects the idea that an object is real insofar as it is perceived by man, arguing that the world is not a mere manifestation for humans.

On the other hand, he assumes that art and philosophy belong to a sphere that is not directly observable: art and philosophy cannot grasp objects in terms of observable qualities, as they do not have direct access to their objects, as in the case of science (Harman 2019). This author's assertion reinforces our idea that the work of art is composed of a material plane, which alone lacks artisticity, and a conceptual plane, which completes the material plane, configuring the entity.

Additionally, and entering into the perspective of the conservator of contemporary art, the description and documentation of these perceptions and experiences, in the most detailed way possible, will be fundamental if we want to bequeath to the future what the artwork really is.

Furthermore, the consistency of a work is defined as the sum of its properties, both material and immaterial, but, we think, also as the sum of the values it has acquired over time. Thus, if the conservator is to make the artistic manifestation last, he must understand what it consists of, what are its essential properties and what are its anecdotal or secondary properties (Locke 2002). The understanding of the entity, its comprehension, will therefore pass through the knowledge of these characteristics.

We will not discuss whether the knowledge of the Truth is possible, since, in any case, the conservator must try to get as close as possible to this knowledge thanks to all the tools at his disposal: interviewing the artist, scientific study of the subject matter, phenomenological description, construction of the biographical body... all these fields will be well developed in the documentation prior to the decision making process.

Thus, facilitating the correct experience of the entity would be one of the main functions of the conservator and, for this, he must strive to understand what it consists of, otherwise, he will not be able to contribute correctly to its existence. To understand the essence of that which exists in reality is one of the perspectives of the ontological, of that which is relative to being. The ontological analysis of our works, then, would be the one that analyses and studies what they are (Heidegger 2005), ontological, not ontic, since the ontological is a human elaboration that analyses the being of the entity from the interpretation of its essence: ontological, since the perception of the entity will be carried out by a subject, the human being.

At the same time, it is necessary to know what a paradigm is. A paradigm is a set of theories or a common and accepted ethical code, which serves for decision-making and the advancement of knowledge. Edgar Morin determines, in the framework of the establishment of what is his theory of complexity, that “a paradigm is constituted by a certain type of extremely strong logical relationship between master notions, key notions, key principles...” Morin defines complexity as a fabric. A weave of events, actions, interactions... that configure the phenomenal world. It is a fabric capable of ordering disorder, ambiguity or uncertainty. For Morin it is from this perspective that we must approach the work of art. It is from complexity that we will be able to understand it (Morin 2009).

It is known that the paradigm of scientific conservation is the commonly accepted in the discipline of conservation and restoration of cultural property. However, it would be impossible to attempt to deal with the conservation of current artworks solely from the paradigm of scientific conservation. Science applied to the study of cultural property and its conservation is useful especially within this paradigm, but the conservation of contemporary art goes far beyond matter. The intangible, naturally, is part of our entity, of our work. Thus, the phenomenological, that which is apprehended through the senses (Cofré 1991), must also be taken into account when analysing the consistency of our artworks, because it determines them.

The code of ethics valid for the paradigm of scientific restoration is not sufficient to address the situations encountered by the conservator of contemporary art. In reality we find the intermittent materialization of the artworks, as in the case of installations, or sometimes, the ruin, and even death of them. In this sense, we have previously pointed out the existence of the paradigm of the death of the work (Llamas, 2020).

In addition to the paradigms previously analysed, we can also find that our artwork must be approached from the paradigm of the processual. In this case, matter can transform in an intentional manner and determined a priori by the artist, this process constituting what is essential in the consistency of the entity. It is obvious that in this paradigm we cannot freeze the state of matter at a single point, and that all the states of the artwork would be equally authentic.

Another possibility is that our work falls within the performance paradigm (Van de Vall 2017). In this paradigm, matter may take a back seat, as the artwork is shaped

from the performative, from live action: in this case, matter might not exist or be irrelevant to the question of conservation.

For Nicolai Hartmann (1977), art exists in a world with a stratified structure. The work is sustained by its matter, a matter that is part of the sensible reality, which would be the external stratum of the work. However, there is also an internal stratum of art, so that the artistic appears to the spectator from this internal stratum, its nature being immaterial. We find this conception very interesting and it helps to shape the ideas presented below.

In the aesthetic object, the material is stone, bronze, oil, words or sound. But “however they were shaped, these materials would be mute and could not carry a spiritual content without the opposing action of the living spirit”. In other words, matter alone does not constitute the work of art.

In this sense, in our opinion, the work would be constituted by several superimposed planes: one that refers to the matter on which it is based; another that refers to the conceptual part of the work, to that which is revealed, that which makes sense and makes itself present to a living spirit, to use Hartmann’s terminology; finally, its development over time could be studied from an axiological and biographical point of view.

Given the need to interpret and understand the artwork, the documentation process, prior to making decisions helps us to obtain the most complete knowledge possible of the entity. In relation to the complete knowledge of the work of art, we must ask ourselves whether this is possible, since, as Prigogine (2012) points out, there are always new processes of transformation and increasing complexity, so that, in our opinion, this knowledge is always under construction. The evolution of knowledge would be towards increasing complexity.

In this process, we must be taken into account the three frameworks that constitute them: the conceptual, the material and the biographical. These frameworks are composed of various hierarchical elements that substantiate the artwork and characterize it, as they endow it with certain properties. Elements of the material framework would be, for example, the type of monitors used, or the type of birds and plants present; constitutive elements of the conceptual framework could be the need for public interaction or a certain semantic connotation provided by the artist; constitutive elements of the biographical framework could be the social value acquired by a mural painting or the intervention process carried out prior to the work. In a kinetic work, the first and most important constituent element of the conceptual scope would be the need for movement. In this same kinetic work, the need for the matter to be the pristine one, might not be in the first place of the material framework, being occur its substitution in the face of a certain discrepancy.

The hierarchy of constituent elements in each framework is essential if we want to make the right decisions. This analysis, aimed at ordering and classification, is one of the first steps before the need for intervention, documentation, or exhibition. Not everything has the same importance.

The study of how the passage of time will affect essential issues in the entity will also help us to place it in the right paradigm. The passage of time gives rise to the appearance of discrepancies, such as the impossibility of respecting artistic intent while safeguarding pristine matter, one of the most common. The artist can help us in this sense to understand how degradation will affect essential issues, and therefore, to understand how damaged our work is.

Artistic intention is related to the ontological, to what the entity truly is, although it does not determine it completely in our opinion, since the entity has been acquiring new elements, generally from the biographical plane, which have been gradually completing it. In this sense, the artist is of great help in the hermeneutic process of interpretation. However, the artist's opinion, when faced with a decision-making process, is somewhat different. Several issues can condition the artist's opinion: the art market, oblivion in the face of the passage of time, involuntary mutation...

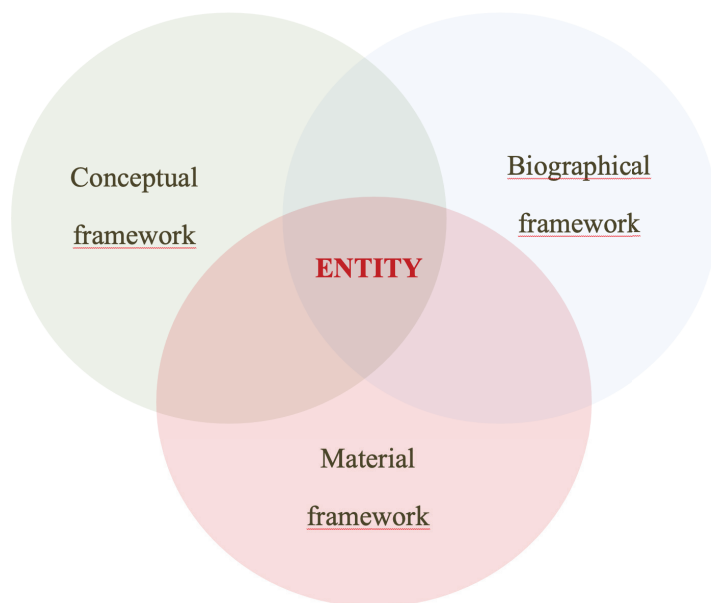


Illustration 1. The different superimposed frameworks constitute the entity. Own elaboration.

#### 4. A case of intervention included in the paradigm of scientific restoration

Chocolate is a work by the artist Enriqueta Hueso from the late eighties<sup>3</sup> (Fig.1). Although the materials that constitute it are absolutely unusual (Wharton, Blank and Dean 1995), the intervention that was carried out on the occasion of its restoration would be framed within the paradigm of scientific restoration. On the *material framework*, the work was made with metal shavings adhered to a two-millimeter-thick plywood sheet; milk chocolate in large fillings applied to the metal shavings; iron bars and a cupcake wrapper (Llamas, Zornoza-Indart, and López 2009).

In relation to the *conceptual framework*, the artist's intention is to experiment with provocation, seeking contradictory reactions given the qualities of the materials chosen. The contrast between the warmth of the chocolate and the coldness of the metals is obvious. The spontaneity of the creative process, the immediacy and artistic freedom are evident in the type of artwork produced. The artist feels free to choose

<sup>3</sup> It is not dated and the author does not remember exactly the year



the materials that can serve her purpose, even if they are not suitable for artistic use. A fundamental issue, pointed out by the artist, is that while the smell of chocolate is not important in relation to the correct experience, touch, as a sense, becomes fundamental, as the viewer can touch the surface of the work of art to complete the artistic experience.



Figure 1. General photograph of the front of the work *Chocolate*, by Enriqueta Hueso. (Llamas et. al. 2009, p. 56).

However, the natural ageing of the material soon came into conflict with the meaning of the entity. Numerous pathologies appeared: excessive oxidation of the metal bars, detachment of the metal shavings that did not adhere well to the chocolate, deformation of the chocolate due to heat, sugar blooms that generated a whitish layer on the surface, small pieces of detached chocolate... all of which ended up seriously affecting the physical integrity and, as we have said, the possibility of correctly apprehending the work. In view of this situation, restoration became necessary.

In this sense, during the usual interview it became clear how decisive the poor state of conservation of the artwork was for its correct interpretation: the degraded material was seriously affecting the experience, which is why the artist herself demanded the intervention.

In relation to the *biographical framework* (Van de Vall et al. 2011), the one that tells us about the evolution over time, the one that tells us about issues related to cultural meaning, to the various values acquired and the apprehension by the community, it should be noted that *Chocotate* had a high artistic and emotional value for the author and that she kept it in her workshop with great care, although the environ-

mental factors to which it was subjected over the years did not favour its stability.

Continuing with the process of understanding the entity that concerns us, and given the need to restore the artwork, and given the need to do so in a way that does not affect its Truth-authenticity, and given that it is impossible to get the right intervention if the relative importance of the constituent elements is not known, once the previous material, conceptual and biographical planes are understood, it is worth thinking about the hierarchy of these elements.

The interpretation (Castro 2012) is possible in this case thanks to the invaluable help of the artist, who facilitates the process through the interview. In relation to the matter, the most important aesthetic elements were the shape (strong chocolate textures and roughness), texture (rough areas due to the metal shavings and smooth areas due to the chocolate), and colour and surface appearance (matt and gloss). The artist herself indicated that these characteristics were the fundamental ones in the work of art, and that their change or degradation seriously affected the correct experience. They thus become essential issues, as the spectator is called upon to touch the surface in order to perceive the strong contrasts between the chosen materials.

The change of these elements, due to natural ageing (Hölling 2017), affects substantial questions of the entity, as the artist herself demonstrates by proposing restoration, which is necessary because the material is no longer capable of carrying the meaning, or more broadly, the conceptual framework of the work.

Once all these aspects had been analysed, the intervention process was decided upon, which basically consisted of cleaning the entire artwork; consolidating the metal shavings that were coming off thanks to a synthetic acrylic resin; stabilising the rusted iron bars (the rust was not removed as it was part of the discourse); applying a fungicide to the chocolate to prevent biotic degradation (without affecting aesthetic issues and given that the chocolate was not intended to be edible by the public); and improving the framing system.

We can situate our artwork within the paradigm of scientific restoration, as the materials and intervention treatments and the criteria that have guided it are the usual ones in the scientific-technical discipline of conservation of cultural property.

In relation to the ontological, to that which relates to being (Heidegger 2005), our being is made up of a material part, which supports the properties and characteristics that make it what it is. However, this part is completed by something fundamental, the need to be experienced by touch. This aspect should be taken into consideration if we want the work to exist completely, as the artist establishes that the phenomenological is essential, and the sense of touch acquires an absolute importance in this case.

The experience of the entity would not be adequate without this substantial part. This is also the case in many contemporary artworks, where the public is called upon to interact with the work, thus complementing its comprehension. The resulting difficulties of conservation must be taken into account and assumed if we really want the work to be what it really is, to put the artistic intention in its rightful place (Castro 2008).



## 5. A case of intervention included in the paradigm of the processual

*Efimeras* is an installation artwork by the Mexican artist Yolanda Gutiérrez Acosta, from 2002 (Fig.2). The artwork, which consists of several elements, is completely materialised intermittently, that is, it is brought into experience when it is installed on the occasion of an exhibition.

The installation consists of twelve yellow flowers distributed on the floor on a carpet of natural pink flowers that transform over time (Llamas 2018). The yellow flowers have been constructed using very delicate materials that are easily degraded due to the passage of time: they have been made from butterfly wings adhered to a sheet of cellulose acetate, thus representing the flower's corolla (Figs. 3 y 4). The agave thorns form the stamens.



Figure 2. *Efimeras*. General photograph with visible light of the moment of the installation of the artwork. Photograph by the author.

Two polarities constitute the *framework or material plane* in our work of art. On the one hand, we would have an ephemeral material, the natural pink flowers, replenished in each installation, new, fresh, that from the moment of the installation begin to degrade, that change their appearance over the exhibition time and that will finally be discarded. That is to say, a material part that varies our perception of the work, which evolves and introduces it, as an entity, into the paradigm of the processual.



Figure 3. *Efimeras*. Detail of two of the flowers made with yellow butterfly wings on cellulose acetate. During the study of their state of conservation. One of the corollas of the flowers, where the surface gloss can be appreciated, since the wings were coated with a synthetic resin of vinyl type. We can also see the adhesion of the agave thorns to form the stamens. Photograph by the author.

On the other hand, we have a delicate material, which degrades easily, but which has not been conceived as ephemeral. According to the author, the objects she makes, in this case the yellow flowers, are designed to last over time and to be preserved. These flowers, made with butterfly wings, thorns and rolled agave leaves, are ethereal, delicate and fragile, but they should not degrade quickly. They are conceived as objects that must last, and must be treated with the usual restoration techniques and materials.

In relation to the *conceptual framework*, the artist is influenced by Mesoamerican art and Nahuatl philosophy, where nature is deified as a generator of life. Our artwork, in particular, takes shape thanks to materials extracted from nature. The understanding of this connection is essential when establishing criteria for intervention. The artist bases her theoretical and plastic discourse on this fundamental source.

Within the biographical framework, we can point out that the work has been installed on two occasions. The first was for the *Germinal* exhibition in 2006, and the second for the *RES(T)AUREA* exhibition (Universitat Politècnica de València 2017). In both exhibitions, the appearance of the artwork was slightly different, without affecting its authenticity.

*Efimeras* was restored prior to the second exhibition because, it showed some pathologies such as the lack of adherence of the wings to the plastic sheeting, the superimposition of particles of generalised dirt and the appearance of fungus. Thus, the treatments followed focused on the general cleaning of the yellow flow-

ers, the reinforcement of adhesion where necessary, and the application of a fungal treatment.

The understanding of the artwork makes us situate it within the paradigm of the processual. In this paradigm, it evolves intentionally, as the artist makes use of the passage of time as a constructive agent. The installation is as a whole. The artist considers that the gradual and very long term ageing of the constant material part (the yellow flowers), helps to construct the discourse, as it tells us about the ephemeral nature of our existence, moreover, the slow degradation due to the ageing of the matter of these flowers will accentuate the intended message.

The rapid degradation of the natural flowers produces the contrast between old and new, which is very visible and noticeable in the short term in the installation.

As facilitators of experience, we conservators must ensure that the viewer discovers it correctly installed, following the instructions provided by the artist. These instructions are part of the documentation of the work and allow the respect of its Truth-authenticity. For our artist, it is important that the carpet of flowers that serves as a base is pink, and that the public finds it on the floor, on a low plane. To install it any other way would be to change what the work is, as the perception of it could change. The role of the conservators will be to ensure these aspects, this must be their concern, to understand the need to document it fully to aid future apprehension and experience. Otherwise, we run the risk of undermining its authenticity.

## **6. A type of artistic production included in the paradigm of performance and “something else:” the work of Hermann Nitsch and its relation to conservation**

Hermann Nitsch is a Viennese artist born in 1938. He is an artist who was involved from the beginning, and was a strong proponent of Viennese actionism, a movement that combines eroticism, violence and sex in his works (Parcerisas et al., 2008). His artistic production is included in the “theatre of orgy and mystery” (Nitsch 1994; Muñoz 2020). Hermann Nitsch, a transgressive artist, reencounters destruction through his *Aktionen*, long-lasting performances, where the human being is crucified, covered with white sheets, or bloodied. The artist and action abandons himself in his live events to the pleasures provided by the five senses (Limatola 2014).

The *Aktionen*, performances in which destructive impulses are released through the use of actors, are a collection of direct aggression poured on the human body or on symbolic objects (Dreher 2001).

It seems simple to situate this type of work within the paradigm of performance (based on live action), and where the material usually ceases to be important. However, in this case we are faced with a great complexity, as the artist, after the performances, collects the material elements used in them: altars, crosses, bloody sheets, religious chasubles, medical instruments, paper handkerchiefs and sugar cubes... and creates installations that are today kept in the Museo Archivio Laboratorio per le Arti Contemporanee Hermann Nitsch in the city of Naples.

These materials, which helped in the realisation of the live act, acquire the status of artistic, and are arranged in different compositions, generating the collection of the aforementioned museum (Limatola and Llamas 2015).

If we analyse the *conceptual framework*, we find the force, the violence of the actions, and the initial creative tension of the live act, in contrast to the static nature of the final installations.



Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8. Museo Archivio Laboratorio per le Arti Contemporanee Hermann Nitsch in Naples. Views of the rooms showing the installations on the floor, wall and tables, consisting of numerous textile, glass, metallic, cellulosic and cellulosic objects.... On one of the walls, there are altars with liturgical fabrics and panels of darkened bloody textiles. Photographs by the author.

Once the works have been deposited in the museum, the remains of the performances, meticulously ordered by the artist, who has just composed them in situ by adding elements such as lumps of sugar lined up, for example, or filling the glass containers, begin a process of degradation produced by the natural passage of time, which has an impact on the material.

In an interview with the artist carried out by researcher Laura Limatola, he stated that he was against conservation. This obviously limits the actions of the conservator, leaving only the path of preventive conservation as a possible option. However, if we analyse the future of the artworks in more depth, what do they really consist of? The duality that constitutes them is evident, as in the case of other performances that end up leaving material testimonies that end up in the museum. On the one hand, the live action is essential, a fundamental element of the immaterial plane, and within this action some materials serve as a conceptual basis.

From the moment of the installation of the artwork, we abandon the paradigm of the performative and move on to that of the processual. It is interesting to note that the entity mutates and transforms aesthetically as a consequence of the degradation of the matter, a degradation that cannot be slowed down or reversed since direct restoration is not possible. Thus, the passage of time becomes a constructor agent, which contributes to determining its consistency, as the artist from the outset assumes it in this way.



There is no room for restoration understood as scientific, since it would contradict the Truth-authenticity of the artwork, in an ontological sense.

The diversity of materials present will result in different behaviour in the face of the agents of deterioration, but the degradation will accentuate the semantic issues established by the artist. Thus, the duration of the artwork will be long, degrading slowly, and without the condition of the matter coming into conflict with its significance.

## 7. Artworks situated in the paradigm of the death of the artwork

On this occasion, we will comment on two pieces that are currently included in the paradigm of the death of the artwork. In one of the cases, this situation is evident, given the terrible condition of the matter, which cannot be served for the experience of the entity. In the other case, even if the matter of the work has been stabilised after restoration, its condition makes experience impossible again, as the poor state of conservation affects substantial issues of the entity.

The first of the artworks is entitled *Pele*, by the artist Anna Barros, which was created in the year nineteen ninety. The artist donated the work three years later to the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo. *Pele* is made up of two main materials, rubber latex and wood, which supports the whole (De Souza 2019).



Figure 9. *Pele*. General photograph. [https://istoe.com.br/139035\\_UMA+PELE+BEM+TRATADA/](https://istoe.com.br/139035_UMA+PELE+BEM+TRATADA/)

On a *conceptual framework*, we should point out that the artist bases her plastic research on the search for new aesthetic effects. To this end, in the artwork, which simulates human skin, she focuses on experimenting with new materials, obtaining new aesthetic results (De Souza 2015). However, latex is a material that degrades relatively quickly, so this degradation affects its mechanical and chemical properties. Of course, it also affects its appearance (Bottier 2020, 201-237).



Thus, over the years, the work deteriorated rapidly, showing loss of flexibility, discolouration, loss of material, cracking... all of these pathologies being due to the natural ageing of the latex (Cáceres and Gauthier-Maradei 2012).

Analyzing the artistic intention, we observe that the artist has placed the appearance and finish of the work as an element of great importance in the tangible realm. Other elements are important, such as the type of lighting, which would be important in the realm of the immaterial.

But if the appearance of the surface, the aesthetic issue and the finish, is so important for the artist, the degradation of the matter, which is currently disintegrated and highly affected, would be affecting essential issues of the entity. In this case, it is obvious that the matter does not carry the meaning, as the author herself pointed out.

The artist herself indicated that her artwork had died, assuming this fact with total conviction to the point of proposing a performance that would constitute its burial. As Rodrigues (2014) notes: "Thus, Anna Barros decided that she wanted to see the death of her work decreed and in an official letter she demanded its burial, including a funeral procession..., as well as the whole process to be filmed for documentation, including the recording of the performance".

However, the contentious issue was not the death of the artwork, in this case, but rather that the artist believed that the situation had arisen due to a lack of interest on the part of the institution in the conservation of the work, and not due to the natural behaviour of this type of material.

In this case we enter in front of a category of art, those made with unstable materials that degrade against the artist's will, in which the passage of time is constituted as a destructive agent due to the author's ignorance of the natural transformation of the materials he uses. Thus, a discrepancy arises from the impossibility for the matter to remain in its pristine state, so that the mutation affects substantial issues of the entity, as determined by the artistic intention at an initial moment. The work evolves to the point where it is impossible for the matter to serve as a support for the experience of the entity, so that given the impossibility of re-materialisation or re-edition, if that were possible without undermining authenticity, we must assume the death and disappearance of the artwork.

The second work that we will analyse within the paradigm of the death of the work is *Silere*, by the artist Beatriz Oliver. The artwork, from 2016, is made up of six pieces in the form of letters, made of synthetic material, which together constitute the word *Silere*. Describing the *material framework* of the work, it is worth specifying that the predominant base material of the different letters is an acrylic film-forming substance. In particular, it is an acrylic dispersion specified within the Vallejo® brand as "Fluid Matt Medium". From this film-forming substance, the artist obtains a plastic sheet on which she transfers some photographs she took on a trip to Northern Europe. Subsequently, the whole assembly is coated with an epoxy resin in order to protect and give rigidity to the pieces.

On the *conceptual framework*, the artist wanted to represent, thanks to the meaning of the word *Silere*, the calm and silence present in these lands, as well as the transparency of the ice in the landscape.

However, the artist gives a specific meaning to the materials, hoping that their condition and behaviour will always be the same over time. In reality, the condition of the matter after a short period is particularly delicate, as is to be expected for this type of material (Jablonski et al. 2004). These polymers degrade more or less rapidly

depending on the conditions of preventive conservation, yellowing, losing transparency, becoming sticky due to the migration of compounds present in the mixtures, cracking... All these pathologies were already visible after two years (Digney-Peer et al. 2004).

After a process of intervention, *Silere* was cleaned, removing foreign substances that had adhered to the surface (Ormby et al. 2013). Consolidation was also carried out, reinforcing and rejoining the cracks that had occurred, while at the same time the means to ensure correct preventive conservation were specified and fabricated (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. During the restoration process of the *Silere* work. The image shows how the pieces that make up the work, which are very yellowish, are protected between two sheets of Melinex®OD polyester, an inert and transparent archival material. They will then be placed for storage in a box filled with Plastazote® foam, a closed-cell cross-linked polyethylene, in which the exact shape of each of the letters will have been engraved. Thanks to this system, the artwork can be safely stored and transported. Photograph by the author.

The pieces had been returned to their original form, were stabilised, there was no surface dirt and they had been structurally consolidated. It might seem that the restoration had returned the artwork to a stable state that placed the material at the point of being able to bring the entity to experience. And yet this is not the case.

Once again we find ourselves in the previous case, although less evident, since the problem consists in the fact that the unstable matter degrades, affecting the substantial questions of the entity, those that constitute it, in this case, the need for transparency of the plastic matter of base.

If the conceptual framework determines that the artwork needs this transparency to be produced, then, the artwork has disappeared, as this is not possible. Thus, a strong discrepancy becomes concrete in the face of the impossibility of the pristine matter to carry the meaning of the artwork. We have before us, a ruin, a stabilised matter, but one that is not capable of facilitating the experience of the artwork. This would be the ontological status of our artistic object, while the work, would have disappeared. However, our artistic object, which does not serve to experience of what

the work really is, must also be preserved, because it is the bearer of other kinds of values that make it worthy of being so. Values such as historical, iconic, sentimental... can determine its permanence in time.

## 8. Conclusions

We have just analysed several practical cases of restoration from a theoretical point of view. In each of them, the understanding of what the work actually consists of has helped us to determine whether the mutation of the matter affected substantial issues of the entity, as well as to determine what the current ontological status of each of them is.

The discipline of the conservation of contemporary art has entered into technical issues due to the complexity of the constituent materials, but also into philosophical issues, since the understanding of what is substantial in the entity, that which characterizes it and constitutes its essence, is the first step before proceeding to decision making. In this sense, following a sequence of steps in the documentation of the works will be of great help, since the documentation process itself can be used for interpretation and categorization. The artworks, constituted by the material, conceptual and biographical frameworks, present a series of essential and other anecdotal constitutive elements that must be known and hierarchized for the proper transmission and conservation of the entity. Sometimes, when discrepancies occur, due to the passage of time, between the Truth-authenticity, the artist's opinion, or the technical possibilities of intervention, the anecdotal elements could be modified, or even replaced, without affecting the essence of the entity.

The state of conservation of matter does not determine that a work or entity can be brought to perception. Matter in poor condition can serve as a support for the entity, while others with minor pathologies can be severely affected to the point of preventing its existence. That is to say, we can find works with a good general state of the matter, but with some pathologies that may have affected substantial issues on the conceptual plane, for example, in the case of the loss of elements manipulated by the artist himself that cannot be manipulated again.

On the other hand, the artistic reality itself has placed us before the need to include the works in different paradigms. One of the first steps after the correct understanding and interpretation of the work of art is to determine in which paradigm we must situate it. We cannot always place the works in the paradigm of scientific conservation, the one in which we are most comfortable, because in that case, the code of ethics of the profession would not allow us to attend to a correct conservation. Our entity may consist of a process; of an action; it may have disappeared definitively; or indeed, it may need an intervention of the usual type. These four cases occur constantly in the discipline of contemporary art conservation: these four paradigms coexist.

The knowledge and assimilation by conservators of this point is important, since the varied nature of contemporary artistic production requires specific approaches. The conservation of a work that changes its appearance according to the seasons (bio-art) cannot be approached in the same way as a work of video art, or a work that consists of a specific action for a specific time and place.

To conserve an artwork and to bequeath it to the future correctly, providing an adequate experience is a challenge. It is a challenge that we conservators take on, knowing the difficulty of reaching the knowledge of Truth-authenticity, and knowing the dangers of subjectivity. However, we are convinced that making an effort to understand which are the properties that substantiate the artworks and which are the essential elements that underlie their consistency, in order to ensure their stability over time, is a good starting point.

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