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Conservation, value, and ontology

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Abstract

Art conservation and ontology are linked in that the latter informs the theory and ethics framing the former. Ontology investigates how things, such as works of art, exist. Conservation intervenes in order to ensure that things, such as artworks, continue to exist. Therefore, almost by definition, art conservation presupposes knowledge of art ontology.

A question that immediately arises is whether this link is mutual or one way. The small amount of literature written by philosophers referring to conservation[1] suggests that the input conservation can offer to philosophy is very small or non-existent. Against this, I will argue that the link between conservation and ontology is mutually informative and reinforcing, in that conservation can raise novel and challenging questions of ontology which can feed into the discipline and contribute to its development. I propose to illustrate this mutuality by considering conservation challenges thrown up by contemporary art.

Conservation has always touched upon issues of ontology. On the one hand, conservation actions on artworks that are deemed to be heritage are mandated on account of being specific works of art, so ontology is important there. On the other hand, the heritage status of artworks under conservation outlines specific rules that conservators ought to follow and apply in their treatment. But with the advent of contemporary art in the last generation, such as conceptual, new media, and installation art, conservation raises previously unaddressed questions of ontology, which are not normally addressed within philosophy. This is not necessarily something that happens often, or on a regular basis. Rather, the input of conservation to ontology starts (and is visible) in extreme cases. By extreme cases, we are referring to conservation extremes, i.e. where artworks seem to require ethically impermissible practices, like substitution and recreation, in order to continue to exist. In the case of some contemporary artworks it seems that substitution and recreation are necessary practices so that the work may continue to exist. However, traditional perceptions of ontology that limit substitution and recreation, do not allow conservators to extend their lifespan.

[1] Characteristic examples are Mark Sagoff, "On restoring and reproducing art", in: *Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (9) 1979, pp. 453-470, A. Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and It Development", in: N. S. Price, M. K. Talley Jr & A. M. Vaccaro (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, GCI, Los Angeles 1996, pp. 69-83, and J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Dover Publications Inc., New York 1989.

The conservation demands posed by contemporary artworks steers the focus towards a specific ontology (or theory about ontology) that conservators need to adopt in their treatment. Works of art (objects) acquire a special ontology upon entering the domain of conservation. This arises from: a) the perception of works of art as carriers of a dual identity, 'artwork' and 'heritage', each imposing or restricting actions such as substitution and recreation; b) the conservation need to encompass all possible multiplicities in a unified decision-making methodology applied across all heritage entities, and c) the case specificity characterising conservation, which leads towards a re-consideration of existing perceptions of ontology each time a case presents new phenomena.

Multiple Identities

Conservation is traditionally a discipline that developed a normative frame for decision-making and action in relation to the assumed moral duty to extend the lifespan of heritage artworks into the future. As developed in the early 20th century, there was a slow shift of focus from architecture towards works of art. The reason for this shift in focus was a wide recognition of the 'unsusbstitutability', the 'particularity' and 'uniqueness' of works of art. This recognition reflects certain conceptions and perceptions which persist largely until today and imposes a way of action based on these. Specifically, it reveals:

a) An implicit perception of how works of art exist, i.e. their necessary materiality – this is a question of ontology.

b) An implicit understanding of the relationship between artworks and cultural heritage, i.e. that artworks are necessarily cultural heritage and vice versa.

And it imposes specific rules of conduct (towards artworks) or guiding principles (at times 'standards') for the extension of their lifespan 'as the things that they are' by placing *authenticity* and *respect* as the highest values guiding decision making and practice. Based on the two assumptions above, the rules imposed dictate the preservation of material authenticity, hence traditional practices applied within conservation do not include substitution or recreation even, for example, in the case of prints and multiple sculptures.

Conservators are responsible for perpetuating the existence of the specific artworks which are considered to be heritage. This notion points to questions of identity and in particular of artwork and of heritage identity.

The identity of a thing determines those properties that make it unique and different from other things. The philosophical problem that was formulated around the Theseus ship example reveals concerns about the 'identity' of a preserved object.

> The ship [of Theseus] was preserved by the Athenians [350-290 BC], for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same[2].

[2] Plutarch, *Vita Thesei*, pp. 22-23.

The Theseus ship example also points to a difference in conception of objects and conservation practice between the East and the West, which has divided the conservation world since nearly those times. Western tradition is much more associated with attempts to arrest objects in a certain physical state, or attempts to restore them to a previous condition, regardless of whether such a thing is in fact possible. Eastern tradition is closer to practices of reconstructing, rebuilding, and building with variation.

It is therefore suggested that, what becomes the primary role of conservators, is to preserve heritage artworks *as the things that they are* over time by controlling change. This role on the one hand presents the problem of determining the identity of things, and on the other hand of choosing the appropriate means by which to extend their lifespan without compromising this identity.

Gain or loss of properties through e.g. natural degradation of materials or human intervention, affects the organization of the material or information comprising the work of art, usually causing a shift towards increased entropy. This shift is perceived as change in the work's material structure and/or function. There is a limit beyond which change amounts to the annihilation of the work's identity, as of any persisting thing in general. It is then perhaps possible to declare the end of an artwork's lifespan, or its death. Death corresponds to loss of identity. Decisions about intervention depend on the identity against which the conservation question is raised. Consequently, specific rules and principles should be formed depending on the perception of the relation between artwork and heritage identities.

According to one prominent view, a thing's identity is relative to the concept under which it is subsumed. Such concepts, employed to describe of what sort things are, are called 'sortals'. Identification of sortals relies on ignoring certain differences (e.g. differences among various human creations) and regarding different items as parts of some wholes (e.g. artwork or heritage)[3]. 'Substance sortals' are considered definitive of the identity of a thing. Something that falls under such a sortal cannot cease to do so without ceasing to exist. Consider for example a sculpture made out of a lump of clay. If the clay is crushed, the sculpture will cease to exist whereas the lump of clay will not. 'Phase sortals', on the contrary, allow for something to stop falling under them without ceasing existing (e.g. child)[4].

It is generally acknowledged that things such as artworks enter the domain of conservation when they are recognized as cultural heritage. Contemporary art seems to challenge the existing frame in that many works have indeterminate heritage status. Traditional conservation rules and principles seem to have emerged from the assumption that all art is necessarily heritage. However, in the contemporary treatment of art it appears that this relationship between artwork and heritage no longer holds. 'Artwork' and 'heritage' are sortals, which may overlap for certain periods of time.

[3] A. Gallois, "Identity Over Time", in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005, n.p., Available online at: http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/contents.html [Retrieved January 10, 2009].

[4] M. Zemach, "No Identification without Evaluation", in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1986, p. 244.

Regarding 'artwork', there is a large debate as to whether artness is a property of the things called artworks, or something imposed on them by external factors. However, it appears as though there may be some essential properties to something being an artwork, or at least to being a specific artwork. Hence it is not implausible to suggest that 'artwork' is a substance sortal. As to 'heritage', although in current literature it appears as a phase sortal, in traditional conservation, 'artwork' and 'heritage' are treated as interchangeable; i.e. as two different names for the same substance sortal.

Inheritance is usually thought of as something outside the control of those who inherit. Following this line of thought, cultural heritage has traditionally been considered as something objectively given, as something that the culture one is born into hands over or entrusts to new generations. The first conservation Charters and Codes of Ethics concerning works of art seem to have supported a notion of art as integrally or necessarily heritage. The ideas of John Ruskin, Alois Riegl, and others such as Cesare Brandi, had influenced not only principles guiding the attitude and practice of conservators, but were also reflected in the notion that all art is by definition heritage and hence ought to be preserved.

In the preface to *St. Mark's Rest* (1884), Ruskin states that great nations "write their autobiographies in three manuscripts; the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art". Of the three, art is afforded the status of being the only true record of a cultural condition. "Deeds may be compelled by external agencies, (...) their policies and words may at worst be false, at best only indicative of genius of but a few of its citizens. Art, however, exists as a symbolic representation of the general gifts and common sympathies of the race"[5]. As Ruskin suggests, every great, national, architecture has been the result and exponent of a great national religion. Once built, its longevity would ensure that successive generations would be educated by its symbolic content and that the traditions which embodied the "Polity, Life, History and Religious Faith of nations" would be maintained.

Alois Riegl's notion of the deliberate monument is also supportive of this view[6]. According to Riegl, deliberate are those works of man that are erected so as to commemorate a specific human act, or event. In his view, deliberate monuments are intentionally heritage. Hence conservation has been based on the assumption that artworks are heritage in virtue of being works of art. In such a conception, if something ceases being an artwork it automatically ceases to be heritage. The identity of an artwork as artwork is conceived as one and the same with its identity as heritage (Fig. 1).

[5] P. Hatton, "Ruskin and Architecture: The Argument of the Text", in: M. Wheeler & N. Whiteley (eds.), *The Lamp of Memory. Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture*, Manchester University Press, New York 1992, p. 124.

[6] A. Riegl, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

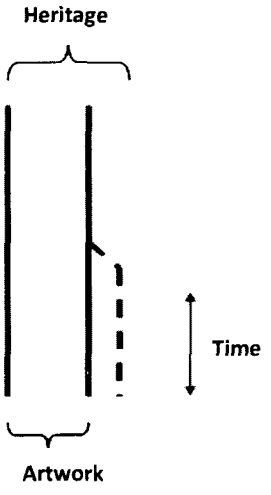

Fig. 1. Heritage-artworks may gain or lose properties over time, but so long as they are artworks, they are necessarily heritage.

However, many authors[7] argue that the decision about what constitutes heritage is not always something already given; rather it may be selected, negotiated, and perhaps even constructed by the heirs. The fact that the decision whether or not an object is cultural heritage is based on values is widely accepted today. What is further acknowledged is that the same heritage object, e.g. a work of art, may be the carrier of multiple values at the same time. This means that people may attribute different values to the same object at the same time; that people may attribute different values to the same object at different times; and also that people may attribute same values to the same object at different times.

Indeed, in the case of contemporary art, an object's identity as artwork does not necessarily coincide with its identity as heritage. Some more recently produced art is not thought of as heritage yet. Moreover, as the proliferation of discussions on de-accessioning, de-acquisitions etc. indicate, exhibition of an artwork in a museum or gallery, does not automatically qualify it as heritage. In Kunsthalle zu Kiel, for example, temporary projects are commissioned and exhibited, however not all are accepted for acquisition (as heritage)[8].

Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* (1970), for example is an editioned artwork, i.e. it exists in a number of suits, namely 100 of them. If one or some of the suits cease to exist, *Felt Suit* will still exist. One suit, which was acquired by Tate Modern in 1981 (Edition 27, no. 45) as a heritage artwork degraded to such a point that it no longer conveyed the intended meaning of *Felt Suit* and thus

[7] E. Avrami, R. Mason & M. de la Torre, *Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*, The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles 2000.

[8] See: R. Barker & P. Smithen, "New Art, New Challenges: The Changing Face of Conservation in the Twenty-First Century", in: *New Museum Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Janet, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, p. 99.

no longer qualified as artwork. The Tate suit was de-accessioned in 1995; it is now part of the archive and is still considered heritage, albeit on account of its historic value rather than the artistic. A single thing which was essentially artwork and coincidentally heritage ceased being an artwork and yet continued to exist as heritage.

In addition, a work of art may be considered heritage because of e.g. its historical value. Although the artwork will not stop being an artwork, in terms of heritage identity it may be an historical object (which just also happens to be an artwork). Consequently, artworks may fall in and out of the category heritage. Something that was not considered heritage may be recognized as such and *vice versa*, without ceasing to exist. University collections characteristically consider the de-accessioning or disposal of cultural artefacts, which, however, do not cease to exist as the kinds of objects they are (e.g. portraits)[9]. Heritage then is a phase sortal, overlapping with the sortal artwork only for a certain period of time (Fig. 2)[10].

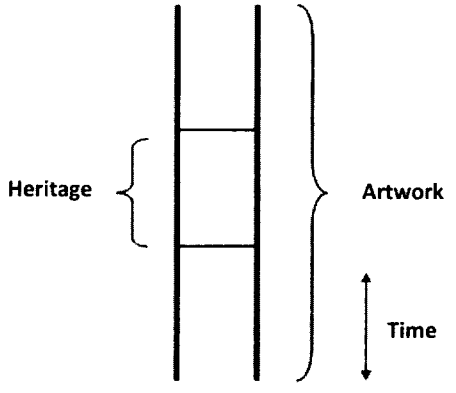

Fig. 2. An artwork may be considered heritage only for certain periods of time during its lifespan, over which artwork and heritage identities overlap.

The traditional notion of the artwork being necessarily heritage may alternatively be seen as a limited case of the latter conception, just as the circle may be seen as a limited case of the ellipse, i.e. an ellipse in which the two centres coincide.

Following the view that 'heritage' is one identity overlapping with 'artwork' identity for a certain period of time, four possible combinations emerge: a) an object is an artwork and it is also heritage (heritage-artwork); b) an object is an artwork but is not heritage (artwork); c) an object is not an artwork but it is

[9] G. Waterfield, "Disposing of Cultural Artefacts in University Collections", in: *The Art Newspaper*, published online 21 October 2009, n.p., Available online at: http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Disposing-of-cultural-artefacts-in-university-collections%20/19622 [Retrieved May 17, 2010].

[10] I. Kapelouzou, "On Artworks, Heritage, and Persisting Things in General", in: M. Stefanaggi & R. Hocquette (eds.), *Art D'Aujourd'Hui Patrimoine de Demain. Conservation et Restauration des Oeuvres Contemporaines*, SFIIC, 2009, pp. 37-42.

heritage (heritage); and d) an object is neither artwork nor heritage. It may also be the case that different means and practices are required for the satisfaction of 'artwork' or 'heritage' persistence conditions.

Multiple Values ('heritage')

When an artwork becomes heritage on account of being a work of art, then it is considered heritage because it is the specific work. Another artwork, i.e. a work with a different identity or a work which has lost its identity as the specific work of art, may not be considered heritage.

The work of art has primarily been understood in conservation as carrier of aesthetic, conceptual and historical value. Alternatively, the work of art is conceived as a carrier of aesthetic, historic and conceptual information that contributes to its understanding. There is a sense in which it is possible to distinguish among interests, or values, specific to an artwork and values not specific to the same artwork. By definition, only the values that link an object to cultural identity may ascribe to it heritage status; only these values constitute cultural heritage values[11]. Other conservation authors also draw an analogous distinction among values attributed to cultural heritage. Iwona Szmelter[12], for example, differentiates "cultural values" from contemporary "socio-economic values". David Throsby[13] separates "cultural value" from "economic value". He asserts that cultural value is separable form whatever economic value the cultural heritage might possess, even though cultural value may be a significant determinant of economic value.

In this paper, I conceive of artistic value as the value an artwork has as a work of art; it implies intent to produce art, which is considered a necessary condition for something being art. An artwork may perform different, additional functions, just as other kinds of objects (non-art) may also be recognised to have aesthetic, etc. values. Artistic value here is defined as a value exclusive to artworks. Moreover, the artistic value of a given work of art is also linked to its identity, i.e. to the fact that it is the specific work of art. Within conservation literature, there have been many current attempts to understand the particularity or identity of an artwork (from which its artistic value stems) as residing in the essential properties of the object. Following Nelson Goodman's distinction between essential and non-essential properties, Pip Laurenson has suggested a similar distinction for Installation artworks[14].

[11] I. Kapelouzou, "The Inherent Sharing of Conservation Decisions", in: *Studies in Conservation*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2012, pp. 172-182.

[12] I. Szmelter, "A New Conceptual Framework for the Preservation of the Heritage of Modern and Contemporary Art", in: U. Schäbler-Saub & A. Weyer (eds.), *Theory and Practice in the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art. Reflections on the Roots and the Perspectives*, Archetype Publications, London 2010, p. 40.

[13] D. Throsby, "Cultural Capital and Sustainability Concepts in the Economics of Cultural Heritage", in: M. De La Torre (ed.), *Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage: Research Report*, The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles 2002, p. 103.

[14] P. Laurenson, "Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations", in: *Tate Papers*, issue 6, Autumn 2006, n.p., Available online at: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm [Retrieved September 19, 2008].

This is an essentialist conception of artworks. According to essentialists, objects or kinds of objects acquire their identity from their inherent nature. The Ruskinian perspective is an example of an essentialist conception of art and of cultural heritage. While Ruskin[15] maintained that the primal aim of art is the representation of some natural fact as accurately as possible, he also argued that artists had to employ a penetrative imagination through which they would "transform the object of their sight" and "reveal its inner truth". The ability of the artist to convey his vision of truth through the medium of art Ruskin termed "associative imagination". The production of good art is therefore the result of two main activities: the direct perception of the eye and the creative working of the imagination. The good work of art, however, does not exist as a self-contained object to be passively received by the viewer. Rather it is symbolic and it invites the viewer to engage in an associative act which contextualises the work, locating it in a shared system of signs and meanings[16]. Quality resides in the relationship which the work establishes with a spectator who engages in an active interpretation of its form. Yet, just as the artist needs to guard against the danger associated with a potentially misleading imagination (i.e. one which would not reveal the truth of an object), so must the viewer be cautious in order to achieve a correct reading of the work[17]. Riegl is also an essentialist in that he believed that some objects are worth preserving because of specific inner features. His disagreement with Ruskin was about the essential characteristics of objects worth preserving.

Other values, e.g. aesthetic, historical and conceptual values may stem from properties of the work which may or may not be essential to its being an artwork. The aesthetic value usually refers to the sensible properties of the artwork that produce an artistic experience; conceptual value relates to an understanding of the work of art as a means of expressing ideas or concepts[18]; historical value may refer to provenance of the work and/or to its trajectory through history. However, different ontological frameworks and respective conservational conceptions of identity place the above mentioned parameters constitutive of artistic value in a different relationship. Thus, artwork identity has been considered to reside in knowledge of provenance, in the effect or experience generated by a specific work, in context, or in artistic intent.

Because, however, different structures may have the same function, in an essentialist perception, artwork identity is established on account of structure. The distinction between essential and non-essential properties serves to identify those elements of the structure that are necessary and sufficient conditions to instantiate a specific work of art. The artwork is the work of art that it is regardless of whether its non-essential properties are instantiated. The experience(s) generated by the work of art is necessarily a result of its essential properties

[15] P. Hatton, "Ruskin and Architecture...", p. 124.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 123.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 125.

[18] M. Clavir, "The Social and Historic Construction of Professional Values in Conservation", in: *Studies in Conservation*, no. 43, 1998, pp. 1-8.

and possibly a result of its non-essential properties, or other accidental or coincidental properties it may have or subsequently acquire (e.g. different context).

The aim of conservation is to extend the lifespan of the heritage object; otherwise put, it refers to the extension of the lifespan of the values that define the object as cultural heritage. It is these values that are pertinent for conservation decision-making only. Other values attributed to cultural heritage entities, which are not linked to cultural identity, are not relevant for conservation decision-making, at least not in idealistic models such as the one supported in this paper. The latter kind of values may be considered as second order values. That is, although they may play a role in ultimate decisions about the fate of heritage entities, they are to be considered at a secondary level; the ideal decision voiced by the conservator does not incorporate considerations of these values[19]. It is along similar lines of thought that John Ruskin excluded financial gain from considerations about conservation.

I maintain that the identity of an object as cultural heritage at a given point in time is provided by the hierarchical relationship of the cultural heritage values attributed to the object at that point in time and mainly by the value at the top of this hierarchy. For example, if a work of art becomes heritage on account of the fact that it is a work of art, then it is the artistic value of that object that mainly provides its identity as heritage as well. An artwork may be considered heritage on account of another kind of value, e.g. historical. In this sense the heritage object is an historic object, which just happens to be a work of art, and thus whose artistic value is ranked lower than the historic. This clarification is significant, since different values may pose different conservation demands.

A related example to the above concerns is Damien Hirst's *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1991). The work consists of a shark placed in a tank and suspended in a weak formaldehyde solution. It is a conceptual work of art and, as such, its significance presumably rests with the idea and concepts it communicates rather than the material manifestation of it. However, the work has decomposed to such a point that the artist himself argues that it no longer conveys the idea of "menace contained"[20]. While the artist himself has repeatedly claimed that the shark may be replaced by another one, conservators and museums have retained the 'original' one. Even replacing the formaldehyde solution with a stronger one in order to better preserve the shark has been rejected so far as it would mean disposal of original material. This is a tricky situation, especially considering that the UK is banning formaldehyde starting this year onwards, so it is not only conservators who will have to reconsider the effect of such a change to the authenticity of the work, but the artist himself will also have to reconsider the relationship between his intent and the material used to produce his art.

Another example to consider is Joseph Beuys's *Fetteche (Greasy Corner)* (1982). The work consists in an 11-pound blob of butter mounted at a wall,

[19] I. Kapelouzou, "The Inherent Sharing...", pp. 172-182.

[20] A. Bracker, "Oh, The Shark has Pretty Teeth, Dear", in: *V&A Conservation Journal*, no. 35, Summer 2002, n.p., Available online at: http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/issue35/shark35/index.html [Retrieved January 17, 2009].

initially in Joseph Beuys' studio at the Dusseldorf Academy. Such a work was *created* by the decision or act of situating the blob of butter on to the wall. Arguably, it is an artwork by virtue of location rather than form. In fact, as Beuys explicitly stated when cleaners accidentally disposed of the first piece in 1986, the work also survives if the piece of butter is replaced[21]. And yet, the work was never recreated and is now considered lost.

Because there cannot be said to exist a "true general overall ranking of the realization of one value against the realization of the other value", heritage values may be seen as incommensurable[22]. Yet, it is arguable that equilibrium must be reached in the realization or satisfaction of the heritage values attributed to an object. Such equilibrium, however, *is* a hierarchy of values. Because the hierarchy is not based on a true or objective criterion by which the values are measured, it is dynamic (in the sense by which a system is also dynamic). At different points in time the hierarchical relationship among the heritage values of an object may be perceived differently and therefore its identity as heritage may also be perceived differently. Thus, one should conceive of the heritage object as an aggregate of heritage identities, each provided by the hierarchy of the values attributed to the object at different points in time. The heritage object incorporates all past, present and future heritage values that may be attributed to it; what is perceived as the heritage identity of that object presently, is only one of its projections. Different projections represent different heritage identities and, as such, different value systems. By extension, in assuming the duty to preserve cultural heritage objects, conservators assume a duty to preserve value systems[23].

Multiple multiplicities ('artwork')

Different works of art exist in different ways (at least this is the common perception within the field of ontology). For example, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is considered to be an undoubted example of a unique physical particular. Other works, such as prints and cast sculptures appear to be types with instances. Similar would seem to be editioned pieces like Beuy's *Felt Suit*.

Further works, however, seem to exhibit yet other kinds of multiplicities. For example, in Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which is comprised of a chair on a gallery floor, a photograph of this chair, and a definition of 'chair' against the wall, one next to the other, conservators allow use of a different chair for the instantiation of the work, since the essential property of the work seems to be that there is a physical chair present, rather than that there is a specific physical chair, e.g. that of the 1965 instance, present.

Sol Le Witt's work *on four black walls, white vertical parallel lines, and in the centre of the walls, eight geometric figures (including cross, X) within which*

[21] J. Dornberg, "Intensive Care", in: *ARTnews*, vol. 90, no. 1, January 1991, p. 131.

[22] N. Hsieh, "Incommensurable Values", in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005, n.p., Available online at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-incommensurable/ [Retrieved February 22, 2012].

[23] I. Kapelouzou, "The Inherent Sharing...", pp. 172-182.

are white horizontal parallel lines. The vertical lines do not enter the figures (1980-81), otherwise known as *Six Geometric Figures (+ Two) (Wall Drawings)*, includes instructions such as:

> ...the distance between the figures and the edge of the wall is variable... The drawing can exist with any number of the figures from one to eight but must be done in the same sequence if more than one is used... Any single figure may be used at any time... They may be used separately... It may be loaned while still installed at the Tate by being drawn elsewhere[24].

And, while, in principle, substitution and recreation may be impermissible as conservation actions, in practice they are very much done. If we examine different cases of artworks and the conservation treatments they have undergone, then a strong discrepancy may be observed between what is in theory permissible and what goes on in practice.

This may come as a surprise when one considers the degree to which conservators intervene upon even the most undeniably physical particular artworks (e.g. extent of retouching of painting such as the *Mona Lisa*[25], recreating limps and arms from sculptures, etc.), not to mention total replacements of sharks and migrations to new media of older video in installations. Indeed, substitution and recreation have always been practiced to some degree by conservators in almost all interventions. Because conservation ethics, however, forbid such interventions, these have been unacknowledged up to recently.

In light of modern and contemporary art, and the realisation that at least some artworks seem to exist in a different way and thus require different kinds of intervention in order to continue to exist, conservators have begun to change their practice and theory in order to embrace these differences.

The observation that Installation and Time-Based Media artworks are prone to substitution and recreation, has led to parallelisms of the ontology of such artworks to that of musical works. Pip Laurenson and Bruce Altshuler have strongly supported this view in the field of conservation[26]. Such a conception implies that the artwork may appear in multiple instances and it may have different modes of existence, i.e. as a written score, as a performance, as a description, as a set of instructions, as an installation in a museum or gallery, as an archived event. The different manifestations of a work of art need not be instantiated by the same person, in the same site, or with the same materials as the initial manifestation. Moreover, each mode of existence may be instantiated at a certain point in time or not without the work of art seizing to exist. Just as one would not say that Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* (1824) does not exist if it is not being performed or if nobody is reading the musical score, or even if the musical score disappears (one could argue

[24] Six Geometric Figures (+Two) (Wall Drawings) 1980-81 in: *The Tate Gallery 1980-82: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions*, London 1984, n.p., Available online at: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=8765&searchid=12496&roomid=3670&tabview=text [Retrieved March 6, 2011].

[25] See for example Claire Finch, "The Story Behind the Well-Known *Mona Lisa* Antique Painting", in: *Artipot*, Jan 29, 2012, Available online at: http://www.artipot.com/articles/1143253/the-story-behind-the-well-known-mona-lisa-antique-painting.htm [Retrieved April 19, 2013].

[26] P. Laurenson, "Authenticity, Change and Loss..." B. Altshuler, "Collecting the New: A Historical Introduction", in: *Collecting the New. Museums and Contemporary Art*, ed. B. Altshuler, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2005, pp. 1-14.

that memory suffices as a tool to keep the score in existence), one would not say that Sol LeWitt's wall drawing has seized to exist if it is not anywhere installed, or if the initial format carrying the artist's instructions has been lost.

The artwork is an artwork partly on account of the intention of the artist to make work of art. Whether the instances produced are good or bad instances is a different issue, but all are equally instances of the same work of art. Moreover, the degree of variation in the performance and performance means of e.g. a musical work, perhaps allows similar flexibility of variation in the specific materials and/or means of a conceptual work of art.

The suggested conception of works of art further implies that held notions about what constitutes forgery or what contradicts artwork authenticity, which are based on a distinction between an original work and other things which are not this original, are at least limited in perspective. This entails significant implications for conservation treatments and especially for the ethical legitimization of substitution, recreation, and other practices that are not currently permissible according to conservation codes of ethics.

Conceptual art may be though in a similar manner. Authorship distinguishes the actual work from a copy or a forgery. Authorship refers generically to the creation or invention of the structure of the work by the artist, whereby its essential properties are defined; it is only linked to performances, installations, or other manifestations of the work, in terms of whether the work is in fact instantiated, i.e. whether all its essential properties are present. Specific instances or manifestations of the artwork may be copied or forged in the traditional sense (i.e. in relation to an original, e.g. the 1938 performance of that specific work at that location). Forgery of the work proper may be thought of in terms of false attribution, but also in terms of inventive forgery, when a manifestation based on incomplete knowledge of the essential properties of a work claims to be an instance of that work.

The dematerialization of the artwork occurring with the rise of conceptual and ephemeral art phenomena from the mid. 20th c. onwards presumably contradicts traditional perceptions of works of art on a number of levels, which may be presented in terms of four pairs of dichotomies:

1. From Object to Concept

Traditional artworks are conceived as the end product of the skills of an individual creator through the use of a particular medium and are identified with a specific physical object. Returning to the *Mona Lisa* example, the work is the specific oils and the way they have been worked on the wood panel exhibited at this moment at the Louvre in Paris. Conceptual art challenges this intuition in that it does not need to have a specific kind of physical presence and it may exhibit processes rather than fixed objects.

As Lawrence Weiner wrote in his 1998 'Declaration of Intent': *1) the artist may construct the piece; 2) the piece may be fabricated; 3) the piece need not be built; each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist*[27].

[27] A. Alberro, "Preface': Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977", in: A. Alberro & B. Simson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, MIT Press, USA 2000, p. xxii.

2. From Original to No Original

In traditional works the artist's skill and technique, as evidenced on artworks' surfaces or discovered through scientific analysis, is considered essential for identifying the original work as opposed to a forgery or a version of it. The use of fabricators and of industrial materials from the 1960s onwards however, leads to lack of an original.

Dan Flavin, for example, was an artist who used factory manufactured fluorescent light tubes in order to make his art. As Joseph Kosuth famously remarked "anybody can have a 'Dan Flavin' by going into a hardware store"[28]. Indeed, his works are accompanied by instructions concerning their installation and tube specifications, the tubes being replaced once they exceed their lifetime of 2,100 hours. In conceptual art, there is no original in terms of physical medium.

3. From Perpetuity to Ephemerality

Ever-lasting endurance of the (original) material comprising a traditional artwork has often been considered an aspiration of artists themselves, as evidenced through their choice of materials, e.g. stone rather than clay or canvas rather than paper. Modern and contemporary art phenomena, however, seem to reject notions of perpetuity linked to the material and, instead, embrace ephemerality in various forms. Characteristic is the use of bananas, avocados, candy, flowers and chocolate in works where decomposition of the material becomes the marker of what constitutes the work of art.

4. From Unique to Variations

A traditional artwork is usually assumed to be unique; it is thought to be just one; the artwork is a very specific object and nothing else can be the same work of art. As Sol LeWitt tells us, however, contemporary artworks may be recreated, potentially many times and at any time, they may exist simultaneously at two different places at the same time, and they may appear in variations.

The challenges posed for conservators are clear:

a) Contemporary artworks do not simply allow substitution and recreation to take place but seem to require substitution and recreation in order to continue to exist.
b) Substitution involves removal of original material and large degrees of intervention.
c) The large degree of creative activity involved from the part of conservators in the installation of contemporary artworks – mainly in terms of adapting a piece where conditions of exhibition change – raises questions concerning authorship and the role of the conservator.
d) Recreation may further result in the contemporaneous existence of more than one manifestations of an artwork, in a manner similar to someone

[28] J. Siegel, "Art as Idea as Idea", WBAI-FM New York radio interview, 7 April 1970 cited in: J. Holzer, "Language Games: Interview with Jeanne Siegel", in: K. Stiles & P. Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996, pp. 886-889.

taking the old planks of Theseus' ship and constructing another ship out of them. Thus contemporary art poses the puzzle of how two apparently co-existent, numerically distinct things can be identical.

As such, the practices necessary for extending the lifespan of contemporary art seem irreconcilable with existing ethics and modern art is considered as a distinct case which requires different rules and methods for its conservation.

But while these pairs of dichotomies may be said to represent a strict divide between the characteristics of traditional and modern art, this is not the case. In fact it seems that traditional characteristics of the artwork are present in the contemporary, just as contemporary characteristics are present in the traditional. While Beuy's *Felt Suit* (1970), for example, is an editioned piece, it is an *object* (comprised of its 100 editioned pieces) of which there is an *original* (all the editioned pieces); it is *ephemeral* in that the suits are consciously made out of a degradable material; it is *unique* in that it does not appear in variations; and it is potentially heritage.

Polycleitus' *Canon* is another example. In the 5th century BC, the sculptor Polycleitus wrote a treatise on the method by which to create ideal sculpture and then he made a statue to illustrate the tenets of his treatise. He called the statue, like the work, the *Canon*[29]. The statue presumably makes manifest a concept, i.e. the principle of 'σύμμετρία' (commensurability). Both the treatise and the statue comprise the *Canon*[30]. The statue *Canon* has been identified by many as the *Doryphoros,* but arguably all of Polycleitus' sculptures made in accordance with this treatise, such as the *Diadoumenos* or the *Discophoros* may be considered different manifestations of the concept. In the case of the *Canon*, the work is the *concept*, of which there are many *instances*, it still aims at *perpetuity*, it is prone to *variation* and, it is heritage.

Contemporary art is not a distinct case; rather it presents further dimensions to traditional conceptions about the kinds of things that works of art are.

Integrated Ontology

The suggested conception of 'artwork' has parallels to what is known as 'four-dimensionalism' in philosophy. The suggested conception of 'heritage' also dovetails nicely with the four-dimensional conception of objects. Four-dimensionalism is a branch of philosophy that examines how objects exist. It has been mainly developed by Theodore Sider and Michael Rea[31]. According to four-dimensionalism, objects encompass time as a further dimension that defines them. In this conception objects are both spatially and temporally extended,

[29] Galen, *de Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis 5*, cited in: J. J. Pollitt, *The Art of Ancient Greece. Sources and Documents*, Cambridge University Press, UK and USA 1990, pp. 75-77.

[30] M. Miranda, "Roman Sculptural Reproductions or Polykleitos: The Sequel", in: A. Hughes & E. Ranfft (eds.), *Sculpture and its Reproductions*, Reaktion Books, London 1997, p. 13.

[31] T. Sider, "Four Dimensionalism", in: *Philosophical Reviews*, no. 106, 1997, pp. 197-231. *Idem, Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003. M. C. Rea, "Four Dimensionalism", in: M. J. Loux & D. W. Zimmerman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook for Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 246-280.

i.e. they occupy time much like events do (Fig. 3). What are seen in the 'actual' world at different times are distinct temporal parts of one four-dimensionally extended object. According to this philosophy, each and every temporal part of an object is authentic. The four-dimensional object always retains all of its properties, e.g. being white at a time, carrying a discus at a time, or having a specific light tube at a time, but its temporal parts may have different properties. Thus, an artwork may decay and yellow, a discus attached to a statue may be lost or broken, and a specific light tube may be substituted with another one, without questioning whether the artwork remains the same.

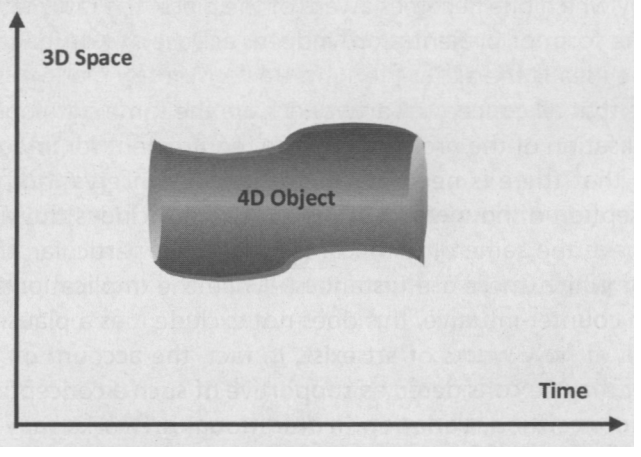

Fig. 3. Four-dimensional objects occupy time like events do.

The different modes of existence and the various instances of a work of art may be seen as projections of the (four-dimensional) artwork. They are perceived not only at different points in time, but also at different points in space. It is therefore possible to have two instances of the same work of art at the same time, in a different space, in a manner similar to LeWitt's *Six Geometric Figures*. Both manifestations are equally the work of art; neither is a copy or a reproduction of it.

The four-dimensionalist conception of objects addresses a further issue with regard to artwork ontology, namely the question of whether all works of art have common ontology. While a few of the attempts to date to address the contemporary art problem in conservation have assumed that works of art may have different ontological status, they do not examine the possibility that all works of art may have the same ontological status. It is a central point of controversy in ontological debates, whether all works of art have the same ontological status or not. It is more often argued that different forms of art have a different ontology, but it may also be the case that all art shares a common ontological status.

John Ruskin[32] expressed concern that the viewer may be tempted 'to like' a sculpture as object and not, in his view, for the right reasons, i.e. as developed

[32] P. Hatton, "Ruskin and Architecture...", pp. 126-127.

through association. Seth Siegelaub, art dealer in 1969, also argued that in conceptual art the material presentation of the work and the intrinsic elements of the art were distinct:

> ...you see, one of the issues that has interested me about this art is the separation between the art itself and its presentation. This discrepancy or this difference is a relatively recent undertaking, or a relatively recent issue... (but) now you have a case where...the art is not the same thing as how you are given the information[33].

According to Siegelaub, it was now possible to split the artwork into "the essence of the piece", its ideational part and "secondary information", i.e. the material information by which one becomes aware of the piece, the raw matter, the fabricated part, the form of presentation. Indeed, as Joseph Kosuth said, "the art is the idea; the idea is the art".

It is not implausible that all conceptual artworks have the same ontological status. The conceptualisation of the problem and the requirement for integration further indicates that there is need to adopt, within conservation, the broader possible conception of how works of art exist. This includes the view that all works of art have the same ontological status and in particular, they are generic entities of which there are instances. While the implications of such a view may seem counter-intuitive, this does not exclude it as a plausible or possible conception of how works of art exist. In fact, the account of the *Canon* provided earlier may be considered as supportive of such a conception.

According to this conception, variation in traditional artworks may be perceived otherwise. London's National Gallery Exhibition *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes & Discoveries* (30 June – 12 September 2010), for example, showcased a number of traditional paintings which had been made by various artists, either unknown or working in a master's workshop. These were presented as either copies of the master's original, or as versions of an original work. Several paintings of *The Baptism of Christ* (1630-1685), for example, had been at times assumed to be originals, 19th century fakes, and early copies after Pietro Perugino.

Frans van Mieris the Elder, used to paint many of his works in pairs, i.e. nearly identical, but would only sign one of them. The exhibition attempted to shed light as to which of his *A Woman in a Red Jacket Feeding a Parrot* (1663) was the original, or the actual 'work'. Scientific investigation was expected to reveal that only one of two versions of Caspar Friedrich's *Winter Landscape* (1811) is the original. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646) in the National Gallery was presented as a work made in Rembrandt van Rijn's studio "by an advanced pupil as an independent reworking of Rembrandt's original design", whereas the painting with the same title in the Alte Pinokothek in Munich is considered to be the original work[34].

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[33] A. Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, MIT Press, Massachusetts 2003, p. 39 and p. 56.

[34] The National Gallery, *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes & Discoveries*, The National Gallery, Sainsbury Wing, London, 30 June – 12 September 2010, Room 4 *Secrets & Conundrums* and Room 6 *Redemption & Recovery*.

The exhibits in the National Gallery exhibition suggest that, while an 'original' may have resulted from a collective creative process, presence of the signature of the master-artist usually acts as testimony that the work bearing the signature is the master's work rather than any of the other versions. However, according to the suggested conception of artworks as generic entities of which there are instances, this practice may be thought as the multiple instantiation of the structure (concept) in the master's mind; the choice of one among the instances is then a choice as the best instance or the best example of the concept. While they are all equally instances of the same artwork, the other versions are not as good an instance as the one that has been signed by the master-artist. Following this line of thought, the National Gallery examples may be re-interpreted or re-articulated; they are not fakes, mistakes and forgeries, but unrecognized or unknown instances of artworks.

The recent revealing of another version of the *Mona Lisa* in the Netherlands, created at roughly the same period as the 'original' version in the Louvre, under Leonardo's supervision and in his workshop has raised similar questions[35].

The four-dimensionalist conception of objects addresses a further possibility, namely that all works of art exist in the same way, or even that all heritage objects exist in the same way. Following this line of thought, works which have been instantiated only once, or of which only the best instance survives, present a special, more limited, case of the generic entities conception. Four-dimensional objects always retain all of their properties. Change, perceived in terms of gain or loss of properties through e.g. substitution and recreation, does not present an issue for authenticity. Rather, change in a four-dimensional object is defined as *difference* between successive temporal parts.

This conception does not conveniently justify just about any action from the part of conservators. On the contrary, there are two important confinements to the vague criterion of *difference*: a) the confinement of the artwork and b) the confinement of the heritage.

a) In the conception of artworks as generic entities with instances, a distinction between essential and non-essential properties serves to identify those properties that are necessary and sufficient to instantiate a specific work of art. By virtue of this distinction, a specific artwork cannot exist unless all of its essential properties are retained or instantiated. These may range from specific materials to simple signifiers of concepts (e.g. the word 'circle' to evoke Ian Wilson's *Circle on the Floor* (1968), a circle drawn on the wall).

b) Conservators' duty is to the heritage, which may not necessarily be the artwork proper. Thus the obligations conservators have in order to extend the lifespan of the heritage and the ethical legitimacy of substitution and recreation as conservation actions will depend on what exactly it is that we value as heritage. Considering LeWitt's *Six Geometric Figures*, for example, the following possibilities arise:

[35] No author, "Prado reveals evidence behind 'earliest *Mona Lisa* copy' claim", in: *Art History News*, February 22, 2012 Available online at: http://www.arthistorynews.com/categories/Conservation/4 [Retrieved April 20, 2013].

- If the heritage is the artwork proper, conservators do not strictly have an obligation to keep installing the work for it may continue to exist in another mode or format.
- If the heritage is a specific mode of existence, then the conservator has a duty to re-instantiate the specific mode of existence as a means for preservation. If that mode of existence is the written or recorded instruction, then conservators ought to ensure that the written record lasts for as long as possible and/or transfer it in a different means; if the mode of existence which is heritage is the installed state, then the conservator has an obligation to ensure the re-installation of the work over time and space.
- If the heritage is a specific instance of one of its modes of existence, e.g. the last instance of *Six Geometric Figures* at Tate Modern, which the artist personally approved just before his death, then the duty to extend the lifespan of the specific instance includes its original material and involves traditional conservation methods, such as stabilization of the chalk on the wall, cleaning of smudges and possibly retouching.

The changes brought about by modern and contemporary art support a broader conception of artworks which incorporates both traditional and new art phenomena. The practices of recreation, new creation, or assistance in instantiation are subordinate to the aim of extending the lifespan of heritage-artworks. While some of these practices may appear to exist in space, they in fact serve the purposes of time. Creation therefore has not become an end in itself, but rather a means in the service of conservation as we traditionally know it. And the old rules of conservation still find applications, both in traditional and in contemporary art.

The philosopher-conservator

Conservation intervenes upon artworks, sometimes introducing changes to their material, structure, meaning, value, or function. These changes raise questions that require philosophers and conservators to review ideals authenticity, to re-examine the effect of conservation interventions, and to consider whether substitutions and recreations that were done as part of works' conservation treatments have changed them into different artworks; whether they have changed the heritage into different heritage; or whether they have achieved both; or neither.

I have attempted to illustrate the way artworks in conservation have two overlapping identities: artwork and heritage. Heritage is defined by the hierarchy of the values attributed to the 'object', artistic value (including artistic intent) being only one among these values and one that is taken into consideration only to the degree that its place in the value hierarchy permits. Artworks are usually conceived in a rather essentialist way within conservation. However, even on a non-essentialist conception, the 4-dimensionalist view is the most plausible one, even if it does not deliver a value criterion that determines which

aspect are worth more preserving or retaining. The above considerations show some of the challenging questions of ontology that conservation introduces. Regardless of whether the conservator needs to be a professional philosopher, the ontological issues thrown up by conservation mean that the two disciplines are fruitfully inter-dependent[36].

[36] The above paper is based on doctoral research conducted at the Royal College of Art under the supervision of Professors Jonathan Ashley-Smith and Nick Zangwill. I would particularly like to thank Professor Zangwill for his helpful comments on this text and on-going support.