

# The Possibility of Patina in Contemporary Art or, Does the 'New Art' Have a Right to Get Old?

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*Seeing things age is a form of beauty.*

– Ed Ruscha (Bartley 1998: 10.)

The following article discusses contradictions arising in the conservation of contemporary art. As theoretical, philosophical and material value judgements in conservation are referred to traditional art, we are facing a basic dilemma: how far can we still apply these criteria to the conservation of contemporary art, considering its different characteristics, which have dramatically changed its perception by the public and its relation with the cultural environment? It is not only a technical issue, concerning appropriate methods to physically conserve the materials composing art, but primarily a theoretical issue, which starts from the ideas behind it. This article is an attempt to analyse the applicability of the traditional theories of conservation to contemporary art through the phenomenon of patina, i.e. the ageing of art, the preservation of which forms one of the main working objectives in traditional conservation. An attempt is made to transfer the values given to patina in traditional art to contemporary art and to evaluate the adequacy of conventional conservation theories. To better illustrate the dilemma, in the second part of the article, two case studies are compared: the conservation of an old masterpiece and the treatment of a contemporary art object – two very similar cases that involved significantly diverging conservation decisions.

The epoch we are living in is characterised by a potent duality of conservative and creative endeavours. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency to give meaning to the present through the past. Even if history, as such, exists only as a mental construction, as the glass bead game of historians which depends on the changing trends in the historical narrative of every new generation, the real importance is still given to the 'historical fact'. Modern people have a fixed notion

of the material culture, which is considered a symbol of truth and in which only the interpretation of the truth has a right to change. In this world of changing views and relative values, physical testimonies of the past are carriers of true objective history. Consequently, we are surrounded by museums of all kinds, where even to personal items, such as the broken shoes of an 'important' person, a strong significance may be attributed. The question of whether an object of this material culture belongs to the waste bin of history is considered almost heretical. These objects from the past are continuously used to reinterpret history within changing contexts. The quantity of new concepts is unlimited, but the objects from the past, symbolising eternity, are expected to remain unchanged. The material culture has to persist forever; otherwise the history becomes only a mental game, which does not correspond to our mentality of worshipping material culture as a fetish.

On the other hand, the creative approach of our times has changed dramatically. Contemporary art, the art of this epoch, is in a way the emblem of contemporary civilization, characterised by precariousness, perishability, evanescence, and a mistiness of the border between reality and imagination. Contemporary art has made the traditional values of the uniqueness of art questionable, declaring the relativity and reproducibility of everything.

Hence, the result is a sort of conflict between a post-modern cult, which tends to be nostalgic, quoting and fetishising the past heritage, and being passionate about collecting signs from the past. This perception is contrasted with the cult of creativity, moving away from material culture until it reaches the denial of all material.

Apparently, 'contemporary art' and 'conservation' represent opposite sides in this cultural world, the first standing for creativity and the latter for conservatism. Creativity is expected to undergo continuous change, and conservatism is static and changeless. Paradoxically, in contemporary art the conservative, historically orientated side of the world meets the creative dimension, at times interweaving with it, thus becoming inseparable and creating contradictions with regard to traditional value criteria.

In between this duality stands conservation. The objects handed over by the artist-creator to the destructiveness and forgetfulness of time will be valued as historical relics, in the same way as works of traditional art, and will be selected for preservation. Conservators, standing between these two extremes, are facing

a basic dilemma: to adapt to the requirements of a new creative culture, where all traditional values are relative, or remain in their conservative position and not make compromises.

A lack of historical distance from the moment of creation makes the situation even more complicated, as we do not know yet which manifestations of contemporary culture will be meaningful for future generations. According to Arthur Danto: 'We cannot bring ... into self-consciousness the truths about the present that only the future will know. The question of what we ought to conserve, if we mean to preempt the consciousness of the future, is therefore inherently unanswerable.' (Danto 1999: 4.)

To better explain this major dilemma in the conservation of contemporary art, a phenomenon which is characteristic for all visual arts is discussed: the phenomenon of patina. Patina in contemporary art is one of the many issues that generate controversial attitudes and opinions, especially in comparison to meanings and interpretations in the traditional art sector.

The possibility of patina in contemporary art, more than being a technical issue, emphasises the discrepancy between changed attitudes in visual culture and the conservative mentality of the conservation profession.

## **Patina**

As a starting-point, before analysing the phenomenon in contemporary art, a definition of the term 'patina' is necessary.

Natural ageing causes physical and chemical changes in the material of which a work of art is made. Patina, in the broader sense, describes all signs and traces left on an art object by its passage through time – a consequence of the life of an artwork from the moment of its creation to the present day. Referring to patina in traditional art we are talking about alterations, such as colour changes, yellowing of the varnish, *craquelure* etc. These alterations, induced by exposure to natural decay factors and use within human society, change the original appearance of the artwork, with the result of making it look rather different from what might have been the creative intention of the artist.

Despite its external physical appearance, we are used to attributing to patina a strong spiritual value. The physical changes of the material composing art objects are considered carriers of an immaterial dimension of historical, scientific and emotional values. Patina forms a sort of biography of the work of art. Paul Philip-

pot wrote in this regard: 'This [patina – *H.H.*] is not the physical or chemical, but a *critical* concept.' (Philippot 1996: 373.)

Patina is considered to be part of the identity of an art object. With regard to traditional art, we are used to giving great importance to traces of time and signs of ageing. Colour changes, yellowing of the varnish and *craquelure* are not only acceptable, they also give a new dimension and additional values to the work of art.

The opposite is true in contemporary art: the same traces of time are often perceived as disturbing or even destructive to the object. Contrary to traditional art, contemporary art is the art of our times and is expected to look 'new'. However, most pieces of contemporary art are particularly ephemeral. Contemporary artists use all possible (and impossible) materials, including organic substances such as pig excrement (Fig. 1), plants (Fig. 2), mechanical parts which keep kinetic art moving (Fig. 3), and a huge variety of plastics (synthetic polymers) which, although having the fame of being eternal, are in reality more fragile than traditional art materials.



Figure 1] Raoul Kurvitz. *Sus Scrofa II–III*, oil, organic material, pressboard, 1996. Art Museum of Estonia.



Figure 2] Raoul Kurvitz.  
Secondary Cultures: The Youth  
and Middle Age of Eastern  
European Plains I–II, mixed  
media: burs, thistles, textile,  
wood, windows, 1999.  
Art Museum of Estonia.



Figure 3] Villu Jõgeva. Object  
No. 1. Kinetic installation  
composed of four parts, painted  
wood, electric light bulbs,  
electromotor, loudspeakers,  
electric circuits, 1971–1973.  
Art Museum of Estonia.

The result is that contemporary art tends to show the signs of ageing much earlier than we are ready to accept them; ‘...we live in a time when there is no professional consensus of acceptable ageing for post-1945 art as there are for other periods of art. We vehemently lament the fading of Rothko’s reds, but we accept the craquelure produced by aging in a Rembrandt and the browning of Filippino Lippi’s greens.’ (Mancusi-Ungaro 1999: 393.)

In explaining the different perceptions of patina in traditional and contemporary art, a basic issue to be considered is the significance commonly attributed to the phenomenon.

Patina is directly related to two main values of works of art:

- the value of authenticity
- the value of historicity

Paul Philippot considers these two values to be the twofold historical character of a work of art. At the moment of its creation a 'first historicity' is formed which can also be described as 'authenticity'. A 'second historicity', as he calls it, derives from the passage through time, following the moment of its creation – or from the biography of the work of art (Philippot 1996: 372–376). While the latter, the 'second historicity', is closely related to patina, as it refers to the physical traces that time leaves on the object, the 'first historicity' is only indirectly associated with it.

In traditional art, the two-fold historical character makes us appreciate the patina phenomenon as an additional value. The same does not seem to apply to contemporary art, where this phenomenon often gives rise to controversial feelings, attitudes and opinions.

## Historicity

The value mainly associated with patina is related to historicity. As described by Cesare Brandi, the formation of the work of art is the result of the unique process of creation, which starts with a deep intention of the artist and finds its liberation in an image that is gradually formed in the artist's mind. The 'existential reality' (*realtà esistenziale*) is conceived by the artist and used in the gradual constitution of the object into an image as a synthetic act in the artist's consciousness. During this process the object moves from existential reality into an image – and so the new reality is formed in the artist's mind, which is reality without physical existence, and therefore 'pure reality' (*realtà pura*). In a subsequent phase of the creative process, the connection with the existential reality is interrupted, and the image is shaped in the artist's mind. The artist then proceeds to its material realisation. Once the material has been used in the physical construction of the work of art, it starts its existence independent of the artist and **it is historicised** as a result of human work (Jokilehto 1999: 228–231). It is the beginning of its lifetime or biography, of the second historicity, as Philippot calls it.

So, the historical value is, first of all, a value which is not intrinsic to the work of art, but is an added value, a value that is given from outside and, as such, is not an exclusive characteristic of the art. That is why we can also consider it as a secondary value – intrinsic values, such as aesthetics, message, intent, and authenticity, being the primary values.

In traditional art we have no doubt that every single piece is a carrier of historicity. ‘Historically we have seen that the *patina* documents the passage through time of the work of art and thus needs to be preserved.’ (Brandi 1996: 378.) Even in cases in which we are not able to appreciate the inherent values of a given object (e.g. it is too damaged or has lost its artistic/aesthetic value), we still preserve it as a historical document.

Contemporary art, as long as it is ‘contemporary’, does not yet have a real history. The moment of its creation is too near to historicise the work of art. Value can be attributed only to the ‘first historicity’, i.e. its creation, and not to the non-existent passage through time. ‘From the hand of man we expect complete works as symbols of necessary and lawful production; from nature working over time, on the other hand, we expect the dissolution of completeness as a symbol of an equally necessary and lawful decay.’ (Riegel 1996: 73.) Therefore, contemporary art is expected to look complete, as nature has not had time to dissolve its completeness.

The lack of historical distance makes any conservation decision in contemporary art extremely difficult. For the same reason it is impossible to appreciate the patina phenomenon as an additional historical value of a contemporary work of art. The newness value gains precedence over the value of historicity, because ‘Newness value [*Neuheitswert – H.H.*] is indeed the most formidable opponent of the age value.’ (Riegel 1996: 80.) This might be one reason why we are not willing to accept ‘new art’ getting old.

The appreciation of patina as a historical value in contemporary art is possible only through the awareness of its potential to become an essential value for future generations. According to Arthur Danto: ‘We now know that everything is worth saving, since we do not know what will and what won’t interest the future.’ (Danto 1999: 8.) Does this include patina?

### **Authenticity**

The second reason for accepting patina – again we refer to traditional art – is the value of authenticity. Authenticity does not directly constitute the character

of patina. It is, however, this value that indirectly makes us accept alterations of ORIGINAL material and influences our wish to keep it, along with the traces of time it shows.

What is traditionally meant by 'authenticity' is the idea of the uniqueness of a work of art. The authenticity is first of all related to the physical form of the art, referring to the unique touch of the artist, to *this* special piece of material, which *the* artist was in direct contact with. It refers to the moment of creation, i.e. to the 'first historicity' as Philippot calls it.

The concept of authenticity as a physical phenomenon, as original material, makes us appreciate alterations caused by ageing and directs the decisions of a conservator, who prefers to preserve a faded original rather than to transform it into a beautiful, fresh-looking new one.

It is through the appreciation of authenticity of the original, including the natural ageing of material, that we have another reason to value changes to the physical appearance of art, i.e. the patina.

In contemporary art, discrepancy again arises, as often the material itself has lost its special characteristic of having been created, sometimes even touched, by the artist. In this regard, a most significant example would be the pissoir displayed by Marcel Duchamp (*Fountain*, 1917) – i.e. a ready-made object presented by the artist as a result of his creation. Immediately the question arises: does the material dimension of this kind of contemporary art possess the same 'authenticity' as an oil painting or marble sculpture in traditional art? Only an affirmative answer to this question would justify the acceptance of patina as a sign of alteration of the original 'authentic' material of such pieces of contemporary art.

The appreciation of contemporary art seems to have moved from its physical form to the intent of the artist and to the message contained in the work of art. Is it still legitimate to talk about material authenticity as the unique possible carrier of the inherent values of art? Hasn't the meaning of the term 'authenticity' changed? Maybe 'authentic' in contemporary art no longer refers to the material dimension of art, but primarily to the authentic, original, genuine message behind it.

As conservators, our main objective is to preserve the primary values of the work of art or, quoting Cesare Brandi 'making the text of a work legible again' (Schinzel 2004: 20).

This means that our duty seems to have changed from preserving the original material to preserving the original idea. The original (or authentic) idea could be



attached to the original material, in as much as it could deny the idea of original material representing a value. The original message could, for example, be in the authenticity of aesthetics (e.g. monochrome paintings, hyper-realistic paintings), which already argues against the idea of the acceptance of a possible patina in contemporary art. Or the primary authenticity could lie just in the intellectual/emotional idea of the work of art, the used materials being only a momentary medium to fix this idea for a little while ... and in the next moment these materials might be gone, even though the work of art remains.

In conclusion, both the lack of historical distance and a changing concept of authenticity seem to make it difficult to apply the notion of patina to contemporary art.

However, before drawing very radical final conclusions and setting the removal of historical alterations as a main goal, a closer look into conservation practice may provide further elements for discussion. Two very similar conservation cases, one from traditional art and one from contemporary art, are compared: the oil painting on canvas representing St. Luke the Evangelist (1621) by the Dutch painter Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629), one of the major exponents of Caravaggism in Northern Europe and the leader of the Utrecht School<sup>1</sup>, and the collage from 1963 by the living artist Tom Wesselmann, one of the best-known representatives of Pop art, called *Still Life # 34*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Conservation and research project, carried out in the conservation studio ARR, Amsterdam. Results are published in Dik *et al.* 2002: 130–146.

<sup>2</sup> Conservation case-study presented in the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) conference 'Modern Art, Modern Museums' held in Bilbao September 13–17, 2004. Published in Keynan 2004.



Figure 4] Hendrick ter Brugghen. St. Luke the Evangelist, 1621. Museum De Waag, Deventer. The painting is affected by a typical phenomenon of greenish-gray discolouration of the blue pigment smalt used to paint the coat of the evangelist. While the phenomenon is still visible on the right side of the coat, the left side is already digitally reconstructed.



Figure 5] Tom Wesselmann. Still Life # 34, 1963. Private collection. Photo showing the collage before the discolouration phenomenon occurred, which provoked the complete loss of colour of all lithographic elements: pear, pink cocktail in transparent glass, and walnuts. During the restoration these parts were recreated.

While I had the opportunity to be personally involved with the restoration of the Ter Brugghen canvas, the second case was presented at the recent international conference on conservation of contemporary art in Bilbao, Spain.

Both cases showed a very similar alteration phenomenon, consisting of a drastic discolouration of the pigment, which resulted in a complete change of the original appearance of the artworks.

Although the alteration was very similar, the conservation was guided by two different concepts. In the case of Hendrick ter Brugghen's painting, the conservation solution was to reconstruct the original appearance of the work 'virtually', i.e. the missing colour was reconstructed digitally and the original, faded piece of art was conserved as it was, accepting the changes created by time. The authenticity of original material and its historical dimension were respected as primary values.

In the second case, the collage by Tom Wesselmann, discoloured parts were re-created by a computer and physically glued onto the original surface, which regained its initial look. Definitely, the 'authenticity' of this Pop art work by Tom Wesselmann lies in its chromatic brilliance. In addition, the artist himself shared this opinion and supported the physical intervention. Precedence was given to the authentic appearance of the work.

What can we learn from these case-studies?

First of all, the contemporary piece of art was treated in a way nobody would even dare to think of treating a traditional work of art.

According to the principles stated earlier, the treatment of Tom Wesselmann's work was 100% justified. Missing historical distance seems to give us the opportunity to be free from traditional concepts of historicity, authenticity of original material, unique touch of the artist, valuation of the temporal moment of creation etc.

Due to a changed art concept, conservators become interpreters, with a completely new perspective, in which the objective of conservation seems to be re-creation.

However, something seems to be arbitrary in this case. There seems to be an irrational doubt of being unreasonable. Something, which is conservative in conservation and which, becoming suddenly creative instead of keeping up the conservative side of culture, blurs the borders between creativity and conservatism. If conservation starts to interfere with the creation process, who will sign the artworks?

The well-known case of the white monochrome painting by Pietro Manzoni called *Achrome* (1960) is one more example which stresses this aspect. The wish of the artist was to repaint the piece before every exposition – clearly the intent of the artist and therefore the message of the work was that the work be (and remain) perfectly monochrome white. Continuous repainting seems to be the way to treat this piece. However, as long as conservators remain in their conservative position, supported by traditional ethics, none would feel licensed to do so.

This brings us back to the dilemma with which the paper started. Even knowing that the reproduced NEW would bring out the artist's message to a much greater extent than the faded original, the original is still somehow privileged.

Is it just the fear of changing our conservative attitude towards conservation into a more creative one which may enter into conflict with traditional conservation ethics? Should the conservation of contemporary art redefine existing values and create a new discipline? Do we need 're-creators' instead of 'conservators'? Or should our approach to the conservation of contemporary art remain conservative, although all arguments reveal the need for change?

All these questions are centred around the basic and still remaining issue: for how long should 'new art' look new and when does it start to have the right to get old?

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