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‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory’: Conceptual tools for conservation practice

Muriel Verbeeck* 

Ecole supérieure des Arts Saint-Luc de Liège, Liege, Belgium

Faced with the growing number of case studies in contemporary art, philosophy provides conservators with a series of conceptual tools that allow to theorize their practice. The notion of intentionality and attentionality borrowed from Genette enables a better understanding of the problems that *Dirty Corner* by Anish Kapoor (a work vandalized on many occasions) poses. I will show that the conservator deals with the issue of the identity of a contemporary work in a different way from the art historian, and that philosophy is a practical tool to understand the specificity of the former’s approach and intervention.

Keywords: Philosophy, Brandi, Muñoz-Viñas, Genette, Goodman, Kapoor, Intentionality, Attentionality, Concept

Introduction

‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory’: Kurt Lewin (1952).

If for half a century, the restorer has gradually been released from the supervision exerted by art historians, museum curators, and scientists, this is mainly because his or her training has incorporated intellectual and critical dimensions. No progress in conservation-restoration is achieved without the joint development of knowledge relating to two worlds: sciences and humanities.

However, using philosophy as a restoration tool within the restricted framework of communication, and incorporating it into the practitioner’s ‘toolbox’ represents a major challenge. Indeed, it entails a practical demonstration of the tool’s effectiveness, without the time needed to delineate the instructions, references, or the detailed operating procedure. It also carries the risk of being accused of oversimplification by philosophers and of intellectualism by practitioners.

Thus, let us specify the limits of our objectives in this paper. We will define the philosophy of conservation-restoration as a rational and critical process: in other words, a process based on reason to understand the purpose of any intervention that also assesses the terms of its actions. Philosophy strives to disassociate itself from the singular – the case study – and tends towards generalization and theorizing. Theory is

defined as a *set of concepts, of abstract knowledge, organized into a system with an didactic purpose* (CNRTL, 2015).

Where there is theory, there is clarity. Abstract knowledge requires order, method, and above all an ability to communicate (since its purpose is to explain and teach). Facilitating this generalization process, theory uses concepts, which are defined as abstract and general, objective, stable mental representation having a verbal support (CNRTL, 2015). In the context of communication, concepts are understood through their verbal support, i.e. a specific vocabulary. Words enable the differentiation, naming (and ordering) of things. So we speak of language as a conceptual taxonomy (Verbeeck & Broers, 2016a, 2016b).

The vocabulary of philosophy seems abstract, yet it tangibly helps to disentangle reality and to differentiate between its components. In order to demonstrate this, we here focus on an example that is related to current events, *Dirty Corner* by Anish Kapoor. This work, created in 2011, was exhibited in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, Paris, France, from 9 June to 1 November 2015. During this time it was vandalized four times and was subject to several conservation interventions, from cleaning paint spatters to restructuring the work and its exhibition location.

Attempting to understand the complex case posed by *Dirty Corner*, the notion of ‘reading keys’ as conceptual tools will be borrowed from the philosophy of art, specifically from Gérard Genette, author of a work on aesthetics entitled *The Work of Art* (Genette, 1994,

*Correspondence to: Muriel Verbeeck, 57 rue Sur les Keyeux, 4630 Micheroux, Belgium.
Email: muriel.verbeeck@ceroart.org

1997a, 1997b). Genette was inspired by Nelson Goodman (Goodman, 1976) but proposed an original approach on an ontological level (Delaplace & Frangne, 2012) that is particularly relevant for our field of application. Genette's operative definition of the work of art, together with his concepts of 'intentionality' and 'attentionality', will be used in this paper.

The disjunction between these two concepts leads us to the problem of a work's identity. Finally, an attempt is made to show that different theoretical approaches to restoration, from Brandi (1963) to Muñoz Viñas (2005) are not irreconcilable; Dewey (1934) and Goodman also provide 'keys' to be added to the conservator's reflective and critical key ring.

Dirty Corner

In 2011, Anish Kapoor exhibited several works in Milan. Created for the occasion, *Dirty Corner* was an installation comprising a structure in Corten steel, earth, and mixed media measuring 60 m long, 6.9 m wide, and 8.55 m high. Periodically buried beneath mounds of earth carried by a system of conveyor belts, it invited visitors to explore it (Fig. 1).

In 2015, responding to an invitation from the Palace of Versailles, the artist reinstalled *Dirty Corner* in Le Nôtre's gardens, on the 'Green Carpet' along the Grand Perspective. He removed the conveyor belt – earth had already been deposited over sections of the structure – but added enormous blocks of raw marble, some of which were painted red, his favourite colour (Fig. 2).

Unveiled on 9 June, the work was first vandalized on 16 June with splatters of yellow paint, but was quickly cleaned. On 6 September, the structure and its blocks were defaced with anti-Semitic, royalist, and nationalist graffiti in white paint. This provoked an angry response from the artist and in political circles. The artist initially planned to leave the work as it was, carrying the scars of the attack, before reconsidering and finding a 'royal response' that would both hide the graffiti and reclaim the work – to cover the graffiti with gold leaf.

Before the intervention on the graffiti could take place, the sculpture was again defaced with pink paint on 10 September and a legal complaint was made for 'incitement to racial hatred' that resulted in a ruling against the Palace of Versailles, obliging it to put an end to the offense. The ensuing intervention was somewhat hastily called a restoration, but was in fact a restructuring, which began on 21 September. Finally, the sculpture also suffered minor defacement on 27 September.

An artefact with an aesthetic purpose?

To understand and explain the complexity of *Dirty Corner* without meandering in the intricacies of the

definition of a work of art, Genette's working definition is adopted: 'The work of art is an artefact with an aesthetic purpose' (Genette, 2010, p. 13). Here, we define Genette's terms as follows:

- artefact: an object that is man-made
- purpose: that moves towards a goal
- aesthetic: something that touches the senses, feelings, and emotions.

In other words, the work of art is designed and created by the artist in order to be perceived by the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch) by what could more correctly be called a 'perceptor' rather than a spectator. The aesthetic purpose may be to generate a state of contemplation or bliss (this is the Kantian vision), but also to surprise, shock, or scandalize. Indeed, in addition to engaging the senses and feelings, it may trigger positive or negative emotions. Regardless of the nature of that perception, once it achieves its goal (being perceived), it reaches its full potential as a work of art.

This definition by Genette is a highly pragmatic tool for the conservator, since each word in the sentence can be used to detail and itemize the components in the context of an aesthetic functionality. Every element (the artefact may of course be comprised of other artefacts) is designed to be perceived in a certain way. This purpose is part of the artist's intentionality, one of its functional components.

Let us review the two versions of *Dirty Corner*. The work was indeed an artefact and was composed of a number of elements, some of which featured in the first installation but were not repeated in the second, which in turn incorporated other elements. The blocks of marble in the Versailles version were also artefacts, despite their natural origin; they were cut, transported, arranged, and some were painted. In short, like the mound of earth or the tearing up of the Le Nôtre lawn, they were products of man's intervention.

While both versions of *Dirty Corner* had similar elements, they were not identical. Above all, their aesthetic purpose (their functionality) was very different. In Milan, the public was invited to enter what was described as a cornucopia, an ear trumpet, a Tibetan horn. Kapoor asserts that with this work he was attempting to 'experiment with the strength of the void'. The artist invited the spectator-perceptor to a multi-sensory aesthetic experience; to enter the pipe, experience its gradual constriction, its silence, its darkness, and the acoustics of the interment. Critics and bloggers commented on an almost mystical encounter, citing, in particular, the 'shafts of light' present in *Ascent of the Blessed* by Jérôme Bosch.

One suspects that, from the outset, the outdoor exhibition and the influx of tourists in Versailles eliminated the initial aesthetic experience. The perceptive purpose defined by the artist was different; installing the work

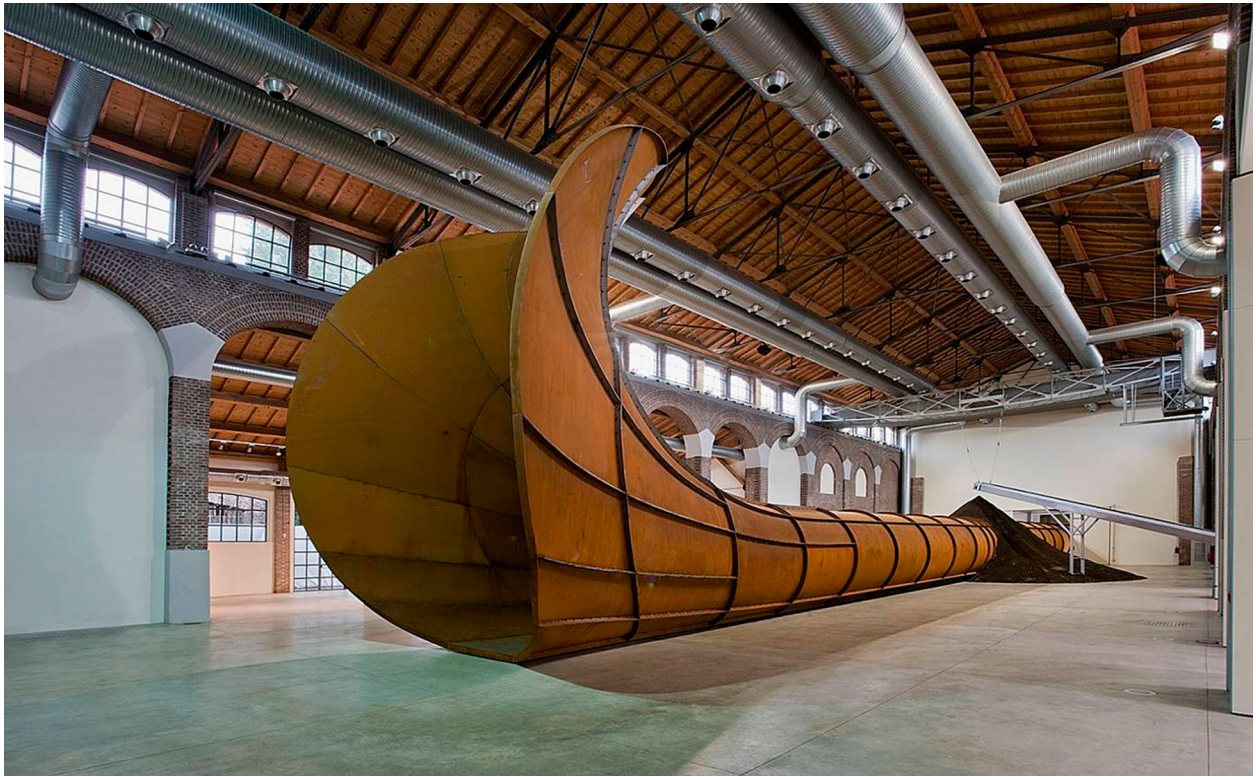


Figure 1 *Dirty Corner*, 2011, Milan, Fabricca del Vapore. Image: © Anish Kapoor.

on lawns normally prohibited to visitors transformed *Dirty Corner* from an object of experimentation into one of contemplation. The work was presented as a

spectacle, offered primarily for visual exploration and, perhaps as such, more demanding of sense or meaning. Multi-sensorality, through the wealth of



Figure 2 *Dirty Corner*, 2015, Versailles. Image: © Anish Kapoor.

sometimes-contradictory information delivered by perception, is more naturally open to polysemy than the analytical approach of the eye.

To avoid any confusion, remember that aesthetic purpose relates to the work's method of operating, while intentionality concerns its meaning. It is crucial, especially for the conservator, to distinguish between the two.

Intentionalities

While the first version of *Dirty Corner* prompted a spiritual and mystical type of experience, Kapoor's objective at Versailles was completely different. 'Visible and invisible, presence and absence, male and female, light and shadow' commented Alfred Pacquement, the exhibition curator, reflecting on the common theme guiding the artist in what he considered one of the most reflective, intelligent, and accomplished approaches within the historical and prestigious setting of Versailles. Several times, the artist mentioned *Dirty Corner* as a 'space of obscurity' or 'space of darkness' (undoubtedly in contrast to the Sun King), which could be a horn, a tunnel or a cave. The organic dimension of the works, the 'uncertain, in-between' aspect of the objects (an expression from Julia Kristeva) was certainly present, but never prominently asserted as part of the collaboration with the curator (Kristeva *et al.*, 2015).

It was only during a press conference just before the opening that the artist seemed to put greater emphasis on one of the points of his polysemic work, asserting the provocative dimension of this collection of works:

My work has two sides, one is things that are very carefully made – very precise, pure – and one is much more scatological, abject, problematic; and it's that side of the work that's coming to Versailles... It's exactly the opposite of Le Nôtre... This whole place, every tree, every bush is ordered, geometrical, formalized, almost as if it's hiding nature. And 'Dirty Corner' is like a big queen sitting in court, displaying herself to her courtiers, completely chaotic... Somewhere like this is full of good taste and what we're saying here is, maybe making art isn't good taste... That's what I'm after. It's also very sexual. It's taking all those things Le Nôtre has hidden – that ordered space, it hides nature, it hides everything (New York Times, 5 June 2015).

Attentionality according to Gérard Genette

In order to formulate an original concept, G. Genette starts with an observation by Goodman, according to which, the eye is never innocent (Goodman, 1976); it informs (gives form to) the object at which

it is looking by selecting the elements that make sense to it. The perceptor's senses interact with the work and make the aesthetic experience a reality for this person. According to Genette, what he calls *attentionality*, or the perception of intention, corresponds to the *intentionality*.

In the case of *Dirty Corner*, the process of 'deviating' attentionality is easily identifiable. On 31 May an article entitled 'Anish Kapoor invite le chaos à Versailles', explains that *Dirty Corner* could be a sort of 'vagina of a queen who is taking power' (JDD, 2015). The expression is strong, even crude, and plays a part in embodying the abstract work. The reaction on social media was immediate; what the magazine *InRocks* described as the 'Faschosphere', the circle of the traditionalist, Catholic, royalist, and racist right, reacted aggressively, with a plethora of curses and insults (Fig. 3).

Indeed, the article catalysed previously accumulated frustrations into a single interpretation: the perception of contemporary art as debasing the historical setting of Versailles; it was seen as both as a pornographic provocation (in the wake of McCarthy's *Tree* – a butt plug – that was vandalized in the Place Vendôme in Paris) and an attack against French identity, represented by the figure of the Queen, a queen who, strangely, was identified as Marie-Antoinette (although the palace was home to many others and the artist clearly placed it in a mythological dimension, particularly by referring to an Egyptian queen).

This restrictive power of language, also referred to by Henri Bergson or Wittgenstein, leads to a biased attentionality in this case. For the French public, the label 'vagina' now defines Kapoor's installation. The work's polysemy became restricted to a directed interpretation and it was this that was violently targeted by the graffitist, a demonstration that, sometimes, attentionality does not just alter the perception of the work, but the work itself.

Dirty Corner, a problem of identity

This dialectic between intentionality and attentionality refers to the question of the work's identity. Far from the concerns of aestheticians, who ponder specifically about the nature and essence of a work, the restorer is confronted with its existence, its immanence, its registration in time.

Etymologically, identity comes from the Latin word *id*, which means self. The identity of a work is its attribute of being itself. The fundamental (and profoundly philosophical, like any issue relating to time) question is: can a thing be identical to itself once it is in the realm of time, a natural factor of change and alteration?

In addition to a number of philosophers, e.g. Heraclitus, Parmenides, Hobbes, Hume, or Ferret



Figure 3 *Dirty Corner* vandalized, September 2015. Image: © Anish Kapoor.

(1996), restoration theorists have also been interested in this issue of identity through temporality. Cesare

Brandi stresses that every work has a double time – that of its creation and that of its reception; even if



Figure 4 *Dirty Corner* 'restored' or 'restructured'? Image: © Muriel Verbeeck.

these two moments are close, they remain separate, as irreversibly as intentionality and attentionality. Between these two moments, there is also an intermediate time that consists of all the perceptive moments, i.e. the sum of all the receptions of the work (Brandi, 2001, pp. 45–51). It should be noted that this interpretive time deals with all attentionalities, which are sometimes also added to the physical transformations. The residue of time is often called patina, but works also have an interpretive patina that obscures our gaze and changes our attentionality.

Dirty Corner's identity does not cling to one expression of the work at a given moment, in a given form, but is a continuum from Milan to Versailles and beyond. In addition, a form of attentionality and consequent restrictive reading has been violently imposed on the very body of the work through an act of vandalism. The artist will talk about the wounds inflicted on the work and even of a form of rape. While he initially considered these marks as memorials, his subsequent intent was to reclaim his work through a new interpretation (Figs. 4 and 5).

The problem of conservation is specifically that it is never possible to conserve or restore a continuum, but only a moment of the work, a fixed identity, like a butterfly in an entomologist's album. This is true, whether

we are trying to get back to the mythical original or to stabilize the current state; the conservator simply affects the momentum of change. His or her approach, although considered and reasoned, remains subjective, like the photographer who chooses an angle and a composition then captures a moment and reproduces it for us. We must be aware that this is only a snapshot, a moment in the life of the work, a fragment of its being that is constantly in the making, but is never the work in itself (Fig. 6).

Theory, a critical instrument

We can use theory to distance ourselves from the profusion of specific cases and formulate principles; not rules, but guidelines. The instrument clarifies our decision-making choices, prior to any intervention. Restoration is primarily a critical act (Philippot & Philippot, 1959, 1996); it contemplates, evaluates, discerns, executes, and brings about change. This change is also critical, in the sense that it carries risks.

'The thought that confronts complexity cannot obey binary logic. Even if the decision must be subjected to it', asserts the French philosopher Edgard Morin. In no way does this invalidate decision-making models, but it returns them to their rightful place in the restoration process, after both analysis and thought. Methodology, as its etymology suggests, tells us how to do things, but not what to do. It is crucial for the conservator to determine what constitutes a work, its components in terms of artefacts, aesthetic purpose, and intentionality. But a work only lives through the gaze that looks at it, the attentionality of spectators, perceivers and, more generally, all relevant parties. On this point, Muñoz Viñas' pragmatic approach in his *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* is innovative, even if the process needs to be refined.

The history of restoration theories demonstrates that, for the most part, they are the result of polarized debates about problematic restoration cases. The restoration of contemporary art invites us to theorise in a less emotional and controversial climate, which, due to the complexity of the subject itself, is more open to diversity of approaches. It is fitting here to recall what unites rather than what divides. Thus, it was an American philosopher, John Dewey, who fuelled the thought of Brandi, before inspiring Goodman and Genette. Dewey is also one of the Brandi's rare explicit references and his approach to the work of art, combined with the principles of Gestalt psychology, inspired several restorers at the *Istituto del Restauro* to adopt more advanced methods. Dewey, Brandi, Goodman, and Genette are all points of reference in a phenomenological trend that is still under-exploited in the thought processes of conservation-restoration. Through the attention it brings to the subject and to the kaleidoscope of



Figure 5 *Dirty Corner*, detail of gold on Corten steel. Image: © Muriel Verbeeck.



Figure 6 *Dirty Corner*, 'a royal answer'. Image: © Muriel Verbeek.

perceptions and representations, it reconnects Brandi's theory to that of Muñoz Viñas. Through its concern for rigorous conceptualization, it mentally equips the practitioner's thinking.

While there may be '... nothing more practical than a good theory', it is also necessary to be aware of the tool's existence, its operating instructions, and to allow time to learn how to use it. In this context, formation and training are of paramount importance and humanistic culture – among the most ancient and most prestigious of these formative studies – was deemed a key component of a restorer's skills. It nurtured a sensitive approach to works, but also an intellectual understanding; it provided guidance in interdisciplinary dialogue and a foundation for practice. Contemporary conservators must grasp, without any inhibition or inferiority complex, the theoretical corpus born of two centuries of practice as this is what familiarizes them with philosophical reflection. The latter is not, as proclaimed by some denigrators of the humanities, an outdated vestige of an old-fashioned culture, but an essential tool that allows us to grasp yesterday's practices and to devise today's practices.

In particular, philosophical reflection will give us the confidence and audacity to apply new concepts, either those already implemented – such as those of Goodman or Genette – or, better still, specifically invented to theorize the restoration of contemporary art.

The conclusion of this paper takes the form of an appeal: the history of theories of restoration must remain an integral part of the teaching of the discipline. Indeed, learning about this evolutionary process is more than just studying schools, trends, or authorities. It helps to discern positions and oppositions, certainties and relativities, and this intellectual, critical work sharpens the mind of the conservator-restorer, which is equally as important as sharpening a scalpel.

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ORCID

Muriel Verbeek  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7271-9127>

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