ICOM-CC
19th Triennial Conference
2021 Beijing

THEORY, HISTORY, AND ETHICS OF CONSERVATION

Intentio operis. From the "enclosed garden" to the open work

Muriel Verbeeck
Research Unit AAP (Art, Archeology and Cultural Heritage)
University of Liège
Liège, Belgium
verbeeck.muriel@uliège.be
CeROArt
muriel.verbeeck@ceroart.org

Keywords
intent, *intentio operis*, Umberto Eco, effect, materiality

Abstract
The typology of intentions as defined by Umberto Eco and, in particular, what he calls the *intentio operis*, helps to highlight one of the specificities of conservators: their special knowledge of the materiality of a work helps them to grasp its "aesthetic potential," i.e., the intrinsic experience it offers, regardless of the artist's intentions or the spectator's interpretations. Should acknowledgment of both issues be necessary, it is the physical consistency of the work that must first guide conservators in restoration interventions. Restoring a work of art preserves its physical consistency, so that it remains as the support of an experience that may be different in the future. This poses the question: What methodology should be adopted to avoid both the pitfalls of historical and creative restoration?

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s and the development of contemporary art conservation, the issue of the author's intention has played a major role in conservators' thinking and practice. Numerous publications have appeared on the subject (Dykstra 1996, Wharton 2016) and methodologies have been developed to accommodate this issue in the decision-making process (Hummelen and Sillé 1999). The contribution of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) and Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA) in acknowledgment of their practical experience has also been remarkable. However, it is important to ensure that intention does not overly monopolize considerations, because the work of art is first and foremost part of an aesthetic relationship (Genette 1994, Pignocchi 2012). The artist addresses the spectator who interprets the work of art more or less freely. The conservator's role is neither to support or reinforce the artist's intention nor to strengthen the spectator's perception; it is to understand the *intention of the work*—an original concept that we borrow from Umberto Eco.

THE OPEN WORK

As a brilliant Italian scholar and writer, and a professor emeritus, Eco was interested in semiotics, linguistics, philosophy, and the field of aesthetics and contemporary art. As an author and novelist—his worldwide success, *The Name of the Rose,* springs to mind—he was challenged by problems of translation and interpretation. Two of his essays reveal this interest: "The Open Work" (Eco 1962) and "The Limits of Interpretation" (Eco 1990).

The concept of "open work" is part of the controversy sparked by the essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), in which Wimsatt and Beardsley affirm that the author's intention is not a major factor in understanding a work. Their position aroused strong reactions in the world of art history; the controversies then shifted to the field of literary analysis where they have gained a stronger foothold. Eco took part in the discussion and supported a more moderate position than the essay's authors.

Eco considers that, in the process of creating a work, the author realizes (makes real and concrete) an intention—a text, or a work of art—but that this voluntarily constitutes "a fundamentally ambiguous message, a plurality of meanings that coexist in a single signifier."

What the author creates is not closed: the receiver—reader, spectator, listener—seizes the given, which is voluntarily polysemic, and interprets it. The aesthetic function is therefore conceived as a transactional mechanism (transmission between two people), which includes an element of indeterminacy.

This is the case, to a certain extent, in ancient and modern visual art. In complex paintings such as those by Bosch or Bruegel, the viewer is clearly required to interpret. Religious paintings, icons of the divine, refer to something other than that depicted—take Van Eyck's *Mystical Lamb,* for example. The same applies, on a more secular note, to *La liberté guidant le peuple* by Delacroix. All such examples, as works of art, create an aesthetic experience: an experience of something (a phenomenon) by someone (a subject).

THE WORK IN MOTION

However, from the 1960s onward, this "openness to meaning" was to be conceived differently. Beyond the spontaneous transactional mechanism of interpretation, artists envisage "programming" the interaction with their spectators. They provide in the structure of their work an interpretative space for the receiver. This was already the case for *trompe l'oeil*, or anamorphoses, since artists anticipated that spectators would "see" different things depending on where they were positioned to view the work. However, music, literature, and contemporary art go even further. The receiver becomes necessary for the realization, for the "completion" of the work.

Thus, explains Eco, the works of composers such as Pousseur (*Scambi*) or Boulez (*Third Piano Sonata*) find their final structure only through the choice their performer makes of the order of the elements. A more current multimedia example would be "Bandersnatch," the latest episode of the television series *Black Mirror*, presented by Netflix. The story takes place in 1984, when a young programmer is contracted to make a video game called Bandersnatch. As the story unfolds, spectators can, via their controller and decoder, choose different options that affect the main character's choices. As interactive decision-makers of certain "branches" of the plot, the spectators then become the manipulative intelligence behind the young programmer, who gradually becomes aware of his instrumentalization. There are five different conditional scenarios, covering a total of 145 minutes. The work is both open and in motion: it can only be completed by the involvement of the interactive spectator.

In the field of the visual arts, op art, kinetic art, and digital art have also successively developed this involvement of the spectator. The mechanical and kinetic mirrors with dynamic reflection by Daniel Rozin, the Infinity Mirror Rooms by Yayoi Kusama, and the installations by teamLab Planets further illustrate the latest developments. The intervention of the receiver is the sine qua non for a work's aesthetic functionality.

FROM THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORK TO THE *INTENTIO OPERIS*

How do these considerations relate to conservation? Paradoxically, they contribute to refocusing the conservator on the materiality of the work.

A work that is described as "open" is still, in its materiality, a form of "enclosed garden": a material structure, which has an organic unity but refers to something else, something transcendent—the aesthetic experience. Matter is the vehicle of this experience, nothing more.

The expression "enclosed garden" (*hortus conclusus*) can be found in Brandi's criticism of Eco's work—not in *Teoria* but in *The Due Life* (Brandi 1966), more precisely, in the second part of the work entitled "The integrated spectator." For Brandi, there is only an "opening" of the work when there is an act of completing a missing phase of the creative process; when we can interpret what is potentially included: "The ever-new arrangement of the fragments of a kaleidoscope is not a way for the user to collaborate with the kaleidoscope, but simply to update in the present its potential structure by virtue of which infinite pre-ordered combinations are made possible" (ibid., 137). This relevant remark by Brandi may provide a basis for further development of Eco's thinking.

Within the limits of interpretation, Umberto Eco defines three types of intention: *intentio auctoris* (the intention of the author), whose importance was contested by Wimsatt and Beardsley; *intentio lectoris* (the intention of the reader), which Eco defines as the right of the reader to project his own interpretations, expectations, fantasies, and concerns onto the work (in this respect aligning with certain theories by Stanley Fish and Gérard Genette); and *intentio operis* (the intention of the work), which refers to the interpretative potential that may escape the author, or the receiver, but that potentially exists in the work. These are not unlimited but are constrained by the overall meaning of the text or work. Clearly, a text or a visual work may be voluntarily or involuntarily polysemic, but the very structure of the narrative, its intrinsic logic, and the natural meaning are opposed to certain contradictions. Edgard Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* is ready for interpretation, but interpreting it as a political manual is impossible. To say that a work is "open," and thus has several meanings, does not allow for *every* signification, and contra-senses even less so.

CRITICAL INTERPRETATION, ORGANIC UNIT

A literary misinterpretation has less consequence than an artistic misinterpretation by a conservator. A literary contra-sense will be part of what is called the critical apparatus of the text: a commentary note, which adjoins the text but does not alter it. On the other hand, an artistic contra-sense created by a restorer is inscribed directly on the work and becomes part of it.

To protect against such a risk, how can we determine what could be a misinterpretation in a work of art? First, by clearly distinguishing semantic interpretation from critical (or semiotic) interpretation.

> Semantic interpretation ... is the result of the process by which the recipient, in the face of the linear manifestation of the text (Editor's note: or the work of art), fills it with meaning. Critical or semiotic interpretation, on the other hand, tries to explain why the text (Editor's note: or the work of art) can produce these semantic interpretations. (Eco 1992, 37)

The role of the conservator is to produce a critical interpretation that makes it possible to identify the *intentio operis*, the intention of the work. How does Eco define it?

> A plausible interpretation at any given time will only be accepted if it is confirmed—or at least not challenged—by another point in the text. That's what I mean by *intentio operis*. (ibid., 40)

Consequently, the whole text—from the work of art—is to be taken as an organic whole.

Let us apply this to the conservation of a contemporary artwork. The conservator cannot and must not ignore the artist's intention, but what matters is the manner in which the artist has materially "implemented" this intention: the way in which it has been realized (etymologically: *became a thing*). What did the artist use as a medium for the aesthetic experience? Is it a simple, complex, tangible, intangible, static, or dynamic object? Last but not least, how did the artist do it? How was it implemented and arranged? With what effect?

The intentions (of the author or the spectator) are part of intentionality in the phenomenological sense of the term. In other words, they are a projection of consciousness. What is important to conservators is the transmission of *the support* of the aesthetic experience, that is, of the materiality open to interpretation. Now, who more than conservators are sensitive to the characteristics of matter, developed in the context of their practice, not only from a visual but also tactile, plastic, physical, and kinetic angle? Who more than conservators can understand the means employed to express these characteristics and the effect induced by them? Who can perceive more clearly the slightest aesthetic variations in tonality, luminosity, brilliance, rhythm, and color?

A visual artist can be compared to a composer, tenor, violinist, bass player, or rapper; the conservator is a kind of sight-reader of the score, able to synthesize voice, instruments, and the work as a whole. The conservator listens not only to the artist but also to the work and understands it as a skilled person who knows musical theory, the rules of composition, the technique of the instrument, and who can see it also as a sound engineer would. It is this ability, the ability to listen to the work in a privileged way, which makes the conservator someone who "passes" on heritage: not the spokesperson of an intention but the guardian of a realized work—which has, therefore, escaped its author. The work, like a text, is to be understood as an organic whole.

STRUCTURE, APPEARANCE, EFFECT

In literature, the *intentio operis* is expressed through a structure and a vocabulary that determine a sense (a direction) and a meaning; the prerequisite is to be able to read and to have what Eco calls "common sense." What about the *intentio operis* of a contemporary work of art?

For the classical work of art addressed to the eye, the conservator distinguishes between structure (matter, which is the vehicle of the image) and aspect (appearance); for the contemporary work, what corresponds to aspect (what

is contemplated) is effect (what is felt). The conservator therefore must reconstitute, in a form of reverse engineering, the link between structure and effect. This is a very complex task. While science has developed tools to refine visual perception, it is still difficult to compare two effects objectively. Their qualification is still largely empirical: all the more so since, as Barry C. Smith (2016) notes, neuroscience tends to demonstrate that there are far more senses than the five traditionally identified ones, and that they interact in an extremely complex way.

The inventory and nomenclature of effects are only meaningful if the conservator is able to grasp the unity of the work in its aesthetic functioning (relating to sensation, feeling) and to keep it "open" (therefore, likely to be interpreted differently). The work is not the sum of its parts or effects; it is not a "totalization" but a whole. It has an organic unity, and it is this unity that the conservator must perceive and transmit so that it continues to live—that is, to be perceived—as a contemporary work. Here are a few examples from contemporary art to clarify this point.

CLOACA

The particular problems posed by Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca project* (Figure 1), a work conceived by the artist as a metaphor for art that is useless—a nod to Kant's aesthetics—have been developed in a previous publication (Verbeeck and Broers 2016). In an interview, the artist told the authors of his relative indifference to the transformations imposed either by the use or obsolescence of the pieces, by the technical constraints (voltage), or by the cultural context (the hygiene issues that forced the original *Cloaca* rectum to be covered during the New York exhibition). Although he once relied on a conservator for documentation, Delvoye never saw fit to use a conservator to preserve or restore his own works. It was his own studio's engineers who mainly put his artworks into function—thus, into aesthetic function—during exhibitions.

Figure 1. *Cloaca Original* Wim Delvoye, 2000

Figure 2. *Cloaca Original*: patina (due to gastric juice) on the jars

Figure 3. *Cloaca Original*: patina (detail)

Successive reinstallations and transformations of different versions of *Cloaca*, sanctioned by the artist, shed light on the concept of *intentio operis*. *Cloaca* is an organism: each element contributes to a whole—the production of feces. The replacement of the parts, the change in the color of the pipes, etc., are not important to the artist. On the other hand, the progressive opacification of the enzyme pots, oxidized by gastric juices, is conceived as an alteration—not in relation to an initial (or original) state but to the aesthetic function of the work (Figures 2, 3): that of clearly showing the digestive process. It is therefore the respect for the effect, through materiality, that is pursued and not that for intention ("making a machine that is useless").

IT ALMOST SEEMED A LILY

The second example is by Berlinde de Bruyckere. *It almost seemed a lily* is both the title of a work and an exhibition that was held at the Museum Hof van Busleyden in Mechelen from 15 December 2018 to 12 May 2019. The artist responded to the *Enclosed Gardens*—recently restored 16th-century devotional objects—by creating her own contemporary installations. De Bruyckere exploited the "openness" of the *Enclosed Gardens* (their potential for renewal as meditative objects for present use) to open up her own creation—her commentary—to interpretation. It is in fact a vertiginous abyss.

The curator of the exhibition, an art historian, explores the meaning and intention of the work with the artist (De Bruyckere et al. 2019). What about the conservator? The conservator, through technical knowledge, is able to dialogue with the artist on the how and why of its implementation, its inscription in the present. In Cesare Brandi's words, not a "contextual" present but a "flagrant" present. In other words, an efficient materiality—in the sense that it serves as a support for the aesthetic experience. The role of the conservator is not to preserve the initial meaning, or even the current meaning, but the *potential meanings* of which this material is intrinsically a carrier. Each work can be re-presented (presented again) or reinstalled, with a different artist's intention. However, the reinterpretation taken upon the conservator by the artist depends on the *intentio operis*, on what the work she has materially created is likely to say again, intrinsically.

It almost seemed a lily (wax, wood, wallpaper, fabric, lead, iron, and epoxy, 328 × 172 × 50 cm) was created for the exhibition (Figure 4). The theme has the particularity of escaping the usual scale used by the artist (1:1); neither the Mechelen *Enclosed Gardens* nor the botanical garden were able to feed the creative power of the author, who molded skins and wax onto her own body to obtain gigantic petals.

> I connect the petals of the lilies to images of skin, of flesh; their fragrance to lust and pleasure; their unsavory smell while wilting to ephemerality and pain. This intense scent brought to mind the skin traders' workshop in Anderlecht, the odor of fresh cow skin. (De Bruyckere et al. 2019, II, 2)

The power of this evocation is not an injunction for the conservator. Its role is to provide a way to listen to the work: its internal structure, its intrinsic

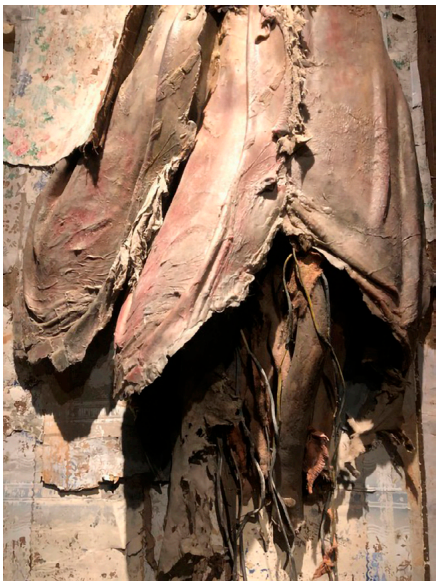

Figure 4. *It almost seemed a lily,* Berlinde de Bruyckere, 2017

Figure 5. *Infinitum 2009,* Berlinde de Bruyckere, 2009

fragility determined by the materials, its appearance, as a form but also as a surface. The documentation on the artist's creation and intention is intended only to shed light, in the final analysis, on this delicately meaty marbled aspect of the whole, which must be preserved. A darkening of the material (wax) or its deformation by heat, for example, can alter the nature of the work. For this reason, preventive conservation plays an essential role, also in the private collection where the work is now included.

Infinitum 2009 presents another case in point (Figure 5). Produced between 2004 and 2009, this work, composed of several pieces and comprising mixed materials, has been exhibited several times—notably at the Palais des Papes in Avignon. Its title makes a twofold allusion: to the infinite without limits, and to the unfinished. For the conservator, the singular case that *Infinitum* offers is an embodied idea: that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Each piece seems to form a unit (hands pinned on a cushion, irregularly shaped wax under a bell jar) and each is "open" to interpretation. But the challenge, should intervention be necessary, is to keep the unit, because the parts respond to each other in their heterogeneous assembly. They do not take their unity from the artist's intention—which was different in Avignon and Mechelen—but from their material co-existence.

What Brandi called the potential unity, and what Eco calls the structural unity, is a work considered as an organism. Each unit's conservation should therefore be considered as a whole, because their aesthetic efficiency is due to their simultaneous exposure. The *intentio operis*, here, is of course concerned with the appearance of the materials, the structure of the space that brings them together or separates them, but, above all, their co-existence, their simultaneous manifestation.

CONCLUSION

To make room for *intentio operis* in the understanding of a work of art is to admit that the work can be understood in itself, in its organic unity, in its material expression. Materiality must be examined as a means, a condition for the manifestation of the effect it brings. With a sensitive knowledge of materials, the conservator is probably the one who is best able to conceive the risk that a work might no longer be perceptible in its polysemic aesthetic register. The role of the conservator then is to keep the work open and not to induce or support one or more meanings: it is to reveal the potentialities, never to inscribe them in the matter. The material, once again, is only the support of the aesthetic experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author warmly thanks Hiltrud Schinzel for her suggestions and Isabelle Brajer for her patient proofreading of the English text—and her always relevant comments on the content. Our gratitude also goes to the copy editors for their clever and meticulous proofreading of the article.

REFERENCES

Brandi, C. 1966. *The due life*, 1st ed., Biblioteca di cultura moderna 625. Rome: Laterza.

De Bruyckere, B., B. Baert, and L. Watteeuw. 2019. *It almost seemed a lily: Berlinde De Bruyckere,* Dutch and English edition. Lichtervelde: Cannibal Publishing.

Dykstra, S.W. 1996. The artist's intentions and the intentional fallacy in fine arts conservation. *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35(3): 197–218. https://doi.org/10.2307/3179782

Eco, U. 1962. *Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee,* 1st ed., Tascabili Bompiani. Milan: Bompiani.

Eco, U. 1990. *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Studi Bompiani. Milan: Bompiani.

Eco, U. 1992. *The limits of interpretation.* Paris: Grasset.

Genette, G. 1994. *The work of art / Gérard Genette. Poetics*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Hummelen, I. and D. Sillé, eds. 1999. *Modern art: Who cares? An interdisciplinary research project and an international symposium on the conservation of modern and contemporary art.* Amsterdam: The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage.

Pignocchi, A. 2012. *The work of art and its intentions*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob.

Smith, B.C. 2016. Aristotle was wrong and so are we: There are far more than five senses | Aeon Videos. https://aeon.co/videos/aristotle-was-wrong-and-so-are-we-there-are-far-more-than-five-senses

Verbeeck, M. and N. Broers. 2016. Conservation of contemporary art: From concepts to practice, *Cloaca* by Wim Delvoye. In *Authenticity in transition – Changing practices in art making and conservation,* eds. E. Hermens and F. Robertson, 141–48. London: Archetype Publications.

Wharton, G. 2016. Artist intention and the conservation of contemporary art. In *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015. Proceedings of the Objects Specialty Group Session, 13–16 May 2015, 43rd Annual Meeting, Miami, FL,* eds. E. Hamilton and K. Dodson, 1–12. New York: American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works.

To cite this article:
Verbeeck, M. 2021. *Intentio operis*. From the "enclosed garden" to the open work. In *Transcending Boundaries: Integrated Approaches to Conservation. ICOM-CC 19th Triennial Conference Preprints, Beijing, 17–21 May 2021,* ed. J. Bridgland. Paris: International Council of Museums.