

# Dreaming of a universal approach: Brandi's *Theory of Restoration* and the conservation of contemporary art

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In 1963 the Italian art historian and public official Cesare Brandi published the *Theory of Restoration*, a long essay outlining a theoretical and practical framework to address some of the most complex problems faced by conservators. The text, developed over the previous 20 years, instigated deep cultural changes, primarily in Italy, where it provided the foundations for the 1972 *Carta del restauro* (Charter of restoration), the official document guiding conservation in most Italian museums to this day. Although the *Theory* is not very well known in the English-speaking world, many of its principles have become widely accepted among conservation professionals around the globe, even though not necessarily as a direct result of the book itself, and not always without challenge.

One of the main strengths of Brandi's text lies in its offer of simple and unequivocal guidelines on what is ethically acceptable, and unacceptable, in conservation. The underlying aim is the minimisation of the arbitrariness of taste and subjectivity in the decision-making processes that govern the conservator's work. There is not enough time to cover in detail the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the *Theory*, but I would like to outline here the key ethical principles defined by Brandi.

1. **The unacceptability of creative conservation.** That is: a conservator must never attempt to substitute the artist, to imitate his/her style and to interpret the work subjectively, especially when it comes to filling in lacunas. It is Brandi's belief that conservation can only deal with an object in the present, and that it should not, under any circumstances, enter what he calls the 'time of creation' (the time when the artist works on the object – although this is potentially an ambiguous definition, especially in contemporary practice).
2. **The imperative of preservation of the patina.** That is: the necessity to avoid interventions that may conceal the real age of an artwork by removing the signs of the passage of time on it (an example is excessive cleaning that makes a work look 'younger').
3. **The complete reversibility of any conservation work.**
4. The need, within the broader framework outlined by the *Theory*, to **proceed always case by case** - in other words, to plan conservation always and exclusively on the basis of the specific needs and condition of the object in question.

It is evident that not all of these principles are followed all of the time in current practice. However, it is important to acknowledge that we live in a highly relativistic age and that conservation, like many other disciplines and despite Brandi's efforts, is inevitably guided by individual preference rather than unequivocal and undisputed parameters – for example, with a new director a gallery's policy on the cleaning of artworks may change radically. To understand fully the significance of this point I like to suggest what remains for me a

fundamental text for conservators, Alois Riegl's *The Modern Cult of Monuments*. Despite being over a century old, it still provides an invaluable analysis of the cultural processes that guide the attribution of values to an object (historical, aesthetic, documentary etc.), and of how these processes affect our reading of the object and subsequently our approach to its conservation.

It is also worth mentioning here that reservations on the theoretical foundations of Brandi's *Theory* have been expressed by historians and philosophers of conservation both in Italy and elsewhere. One of the recurrent criticisms is that against Brandi's heterogeneous, and occasionally contradictory set of philosophical references, which range from Husserl's phenomenology to Hegelian idealism to Structuralism. I will discuss how this theoretical incongruence can affect the usability of the *Theory* shortly.

Crucially, Brandi formulated his framework for use with all artefacts from all ages. For him all artworks should be treated equally, regardless of their age, medium, intent, and irrespective of whether their owner is a public institution or a private individual. Yet the literal application of principles of the *Theory* to the conservation of a large number of artworks created in the last century often appears problematic. This will be the specific focus of my analysis: an exploration of the applicability of Brandi's ideas to the conservation of contemporary works (for the purpose of this paper I define contemporary as the period from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, although I am aware that this is, to a degree, arbitrary). What I hope is that, by taking Brandi's text as a benchmark for the theoretical framing of conservation, this analysis will raise important and, I'm afraid, still broadly unanswered ethical questions.

There are several reasons why the adoption of the principles of the *Theory* for the conservation of contemporary art can be difficult. Firstly, on a more theoretical level, there is a noticeable distance between Brandi's monolithic notion of art and the many and varied approaches found in recent artistic production. The *Theory* is based upon the presumption of the univocality of artistic intent; Brandi believes that all artists conceive of their artwork as permanent and unchanging objects. This idea may be compatible with pre-20th century art (although even this notion should perhaps be challenged), but it is certainly very difficult to reconcile with the fragmentation of approaches that characterises contemporary practice. Clearly this is a belief that originates in Brandi's philosophical background, and that was fostered by his desire to consolidate the methodological unity of the *Theory*. Thus the text recommends for example that preliminary investigations prior to the physical intervention on the materials of the artwork should be limited to what Brandi calls "efficiency of the image which manifests itself through the materials" and "with regards to the condition of the materials". Artistic intent, which Brandi takes for granted, is not mentioned.

The distance between Brandi's idea of art and those developed by contemporary artists is most evident in the distinction he makes between **material** and **image**. Brandi considers the materials of an artwork almost accidental, a means to the epiphany of the image (note the language, here) and therefore the only area in which the conservator can intervene. The image, on the other hand, is what needs to be preserved unaltered, as it constitutes the real essence of the work. This distinction is one of the founding principles of the *Theory* and

implies another dichotomy, that between **structure** and **appearance**. Both oppositions have important practical consequences, as they guide the conservator towards specific elements of the object, even though the separation may not always be clear. Brandi's supporters tend to concentrate on instances in which there is an obvious distinction between materials and image (panel painting is the paradigm, structure being the wooden panel and appearance being the painted image). In this particular scenario, conservators are allowed to intervene on the panel substantially – going as far as replacing it, if this is a suitable option – but the painted image must not be altered significantly. As the *Theory* states “structure may be sacrificed in favour of appearance”. Brandi himself does admit that this separation is not always clear-cut, and delegates the interpretation to individual analysis. However, tellingly he calls the notion that materials may determine the style and the appearance of an artwork a “mistake” and a “positivistic sophism”. I hope you will agree that even a superficial look at much of the art from the last century would prove this a flawed claim. Even without considering more radical post-WWII developments, the use of direct carving and the notion of truth to materials found in the work of, for example, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi suggest otherwise.

All this highlights the fact that Brandi's theoretical framework does not recognise the fundamental aesthetic and philosophical differences between a large portion of contemporary art and that which preceded it. In the last century, for instance, there has been a markedly conceptual shift in art practice, with many artists privileging the idea over its materialisation into an object. This has often lead to experimentation with materials and techniques, frequently without major concern for the durability of the resulting object.

As a consequence of this, when it comes to significant sections of contemporary production the challenge to Brandi's ideas does not come from conservators or his peers, but from the artists themselves, the creators with whose work Brandi tells us we should never interfere. The most extreme cases are perhaps those of openly ephemeral works (for example made from highly degradable natural materials), which are conceived as impermanent and often self-destruct. But these are actually not the most problematic cases. Think, for example, of those works that have arrived to us as ‘ruins’ (to use Brandi's definition), that is as objects that **unintentionally** no longer have the ability to communicate the message they were created to convey. This obviously also applies to older works, but it is an increasingly frequent instance in contemporary art because of the common tendency to experiment with materials. These works often pose one of the most difficult choices faced by conservators, that between the preservation of the original object (and subsequently of historical and documentary value) vs. the preservation of the original idea (and of the aesthetic value).

It is useful, here, to revisit another of the *Theory*'s key assumptions. Brandi defines conservation as “the methodological moment in which the work of art is recognised as a physical object with both aesthetic and historical value, with a view to its transmission to the future”. This recognition implies the attribution to the object of a universal value of artistry (for wanting a better word), which in turn elicits the “imperative of conservation”. In other words, if we recognise an object as a work of art, we have the moral duty to preserve it. Conservation ideally should aim to preserve both aesthetic and historical or documentary value, but as we have seen, if a choice has to be made, image has to take precedence over structure. This notion clashes openly with the theoretical premise of both ephemeral artworks and, more broadly, of much conceptual art - that is, those

works which privilege idea and process over materialisation, and that challenge traditional notions of authenticity and longevity of the artwork. Interestingly, at the other end of the creative spectrum we encounter equally complex problems, although clearly with different implications. I am thinking in particular of those categories of work based on formal perfection (colour field painting, for example). Such works do not tolerate formal corruption, and any attempt to preserve signs of the passage of time on them would clash with the artist's intent to create formally pure, timeless objects. This leads us to another of the key issues I would like to discuss. Although Brandi accepts that certain types of objects may pose contrasting issues to the conservators, he never questions the imperative of conservation in the way he defines it, that is the preservation at all costs of the original object.

Interestingly, it is especially for these categories of work that in today's practice we witness the most significant distance from Brandi's principles. Increasingly, institutions and individual conservators are exploring alternatives to the preservation of the original object, options which include documentation and replication. These ideas openly clash with Brandi's philosophy. For example, in the text he discards replication as forgery, putting the emphasis on the difference between an original object and a replica made today, which cannot replace the original "in its full phenomenology" and cannot but result in a historical and aesthetic fake. Yet today some of the most important museums of modern art in the world are debating the possibility of presenting particularly fragile and perishable artworks as replicas. Intriguingly, even though the *Theory* unremittingly rejects such an option, it is for developments of this kind that it can still play an important role, by providing a starting point to set up an ethical framework. Specifically, Brandi's views on creative conservation can offer useful insights for a debate on replication.

Another rather complex issue raised by Brandi's *Theory* is that of time. Leaving aside all those artworks that do not exist in a fixed and final version but which somehow need 'freezing' for commercial, curatorial or other reasons, all contemporary art poses the question of the shorter distance between the time of creation of the work and the present in which conservation work occurs. The *Theory* presumes in all cases a discontinuity between the time of creation and the present, and crucially the absence of the artist. In actual facts, and at least in part as a consequence of the fragility and perishability of much recent work, today the moment of creation often coincides with the recognition of the work as an object requiring great care. Moreover, artistic intent, technique, materials and the artist's wishes on conservation are now frequently recorded. And, unlike older works, contemporary artworks may actually have been seen in their original condition by those now responsible for their conservation – although relying on memory can be risky, as we all know. Such a compression of the times of the work, combined with the increased awareness of its conservation needs, advancing technologies and, at least in some cases, the presence of the artist may actually suggest a softening of Brandi's stance on replication.

It is worth mentioning here the issue of conservation which directly involves the creator of the work, a possibility that was not contemplated by Brandi. I have mentioned the documentation that increasingly museums and collectors gather when they acquire the work. This can provide a useful starting point for the planning of conservation, but different artists may have expressed very different preferences for their work (some don't mind

deterioration and consider it part of the work's trajectory, while others demand formal perfection at all costs). Yet again we come up against the difficulty of devising to a single set of fixed guidelines. Even more complex, and often controversial, is the issue of conservation carried out by the artists themselves (or by authorised assistants or heirs). Clearly this is potentially a very risky proposition (very often artists change their views on their work over time, and they may be tempted to reinterpret it in light of later developments). Yet this is a prospect that needs considering, if anything because unlike stated by Brandi, there is a substantial difference between a work, no matter how old, still in the artist's possession and one that has been acquired for example by a public museum. And that's even before raising the question of the artist's or the estate's intellectual and moral rights over the work, which are increasingly give legal protection.

All these points raise a number of fundamental questions, above all about Brandi's aspiration to create a single theory valid for the conservation of all artworks. My view is that the differentiation of artistic intent in contemporary art unquestionably demands an opening up of conservation practice to the possibility that different approaches may be necessary for different types of artwork, including the acceptance of loss of the original object and the use of documentation to replace it. This notion, however, undermines Brandi's primary goal, that of devising a single approach to reduce uncertainty. We seem to be going round in circles, here. If we consider a single approach unrealistic, how do we avoid the risk of returning to the uncertainty that Brandi aimed at eradicating? It is important to point out, here, that conservation work planned with uncertainty may cause more damage than natural deterioration processes.

Ultimately this remains an ideological debate, which can only elicit broadly individual answers and is largely dependent on the deeply held beliefs that inform the views of the parties involved. Personally I would aim for the respect of the artist's original intent, even though this is not always easy to assess, and it may, in fact, itself change over time. Its documentation should become part of the acquisition processes and commercialisation of the work (and it increasingly is). Very complex issues related to the ownership of the work, with a public gallery having different agendas and responsibility compared with a private collector, should also be taken into account, but not drive the conservation process.

What all this suggests to me is that rather than a monolithic theory, what is needed is a set of commonly agreed ethical principles, guidelines designed to help conservators decide what is unethical but which do not legislate too tightly on technical aspects. The nature of much recent artworks, which often deteriorate at a much faster rate than older ones, and often inexorably, makes this an urgent priority. Even though today many aspects of Brandi's philosophy of art may appear obsolete, his ethical rigour can still offer a very important model to guide conservators through the most challenging aspects of their work.