

Authenticities: keynotes

Authenticity: how to get there?

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ABSTRACT Other than in the field of chemistry and conservation science, the spirit and intention of a work of art can hardly be examined through mere consideration of the material. The essential idea of an artwork is often dependent upon a particular context and can only be truly understood in relation to its situating space, be it abstract or physical, and its specific configuration. Depending on the respective concept and artist, the original material from which a work is made can either be the primary carrier and evidence of the artwork's meaning, or might require modification according to the space and context to faithfully transmit the intention of the artist. This paper examines the relationship between matter and concept, and discusses the conflict faced by the conservator in attempting to preserve both the material and the idea of the artwork.

Introduction

One of the most challenging artists of the 20th century to broaden the definition of art and, most relevantly to a conservator, art's relationship to matter, was Joseph Beuys (1921–1986). In his somewhat ritualized working procedures and performances, he was able to charge materials and substances of everyday life, such as fat, felt or 'honey', with metaphorical significance and biographical reference, and position them within a specific space and context. In order to preserve a body of work such as Beuys', it is essential for a conservator to investigate and understand the context of creation for individual works, and that context's relevance to form and material and their positioning in a particular space. Today, more than 20 years after Beuys' death, we are left with a multitude of contextual works and complex installation works, which require a good understanding of the various layers of meaning bestowed upon them in order to maintain their integrity and authenticity. If, for one reason or another, artists' installations need at times to be relocated in a different environment, or have to be installed without the artist's supervision, one

may lack the specifics that are crucial to the artist's intent.

One such contextual work by Beuys that I pass every morning on the way to my studio is located in New York's gallery district of Chelsea, along the sidewalk of 22nd Street. It is a row of 33 trees, each planted next to a vertically positioned basalt stone. The trees and basalt stones are related to the action *7000 Oaks*, conceived by Joseph Beuys for *Documenta 7* in Kassel in 1982 (Fig. 1). In Kassel, Beuys set up a wedge-shaped pile of basalt stones in front of the Fridericianum, the main exhibition space. The concept was to plant trees, especially oak trees, throughout the city of Kassel and beyond, each with an adjacent basalt stone from the pile at *Documenta 7*. The artist considered the work would be completed once all the basalt stones had been used and set up next to a tree. This project was to be concluded within five years, for the next *Documenta* in 1987 (*Documenta* 1982: 44).

The trees and the basalt stones were to be planted in the same soil, approximately 1 m apart. Beuys' vision was that as each of the oak trees grew it would move closer to the prehistoric stone installed nearby. Life, as the symbol

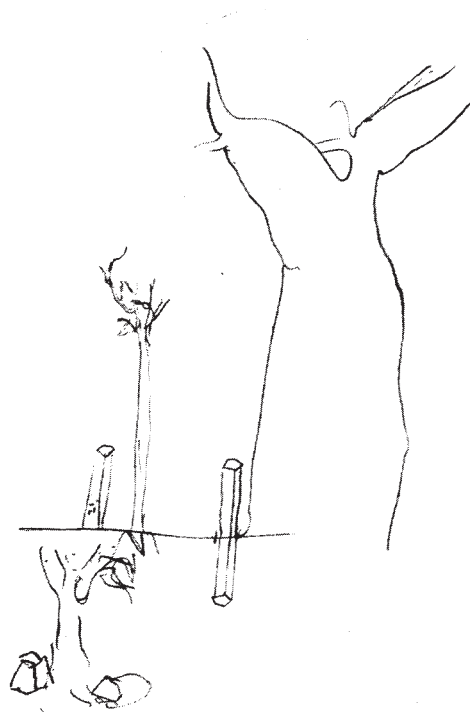


Figure 1 Joseph Beuys, untitled drawing, 1982 (*7000 Eichen* Joseph Beuys, Verlag Wather Koenig, 1987).

of future, would touch the past and ultimately close the gap – or heal the wound – between the past and the future. Patrons could purchase a ‘tree certificate’ for the amount of DM 500 and have a ‘Beuys Tree’ planted in front of their home. For Beuys, this was a way to ‘go more and more outside the gallery space to be among the problems of nature and problems of human beings in their working places’. Speaking in an interview with Richard Demarco, published in 1987, he continued: ‘This will be a regenerative activity: it will be a therapy for all of the problems we are standing before’ (Demarco 1987: 15–16).

At first glance, Beuys’ concept was simple and striking: the archaic pairing and polarity of the living tree and the petrified prehistoric lava stone suggested a time-based sculpture that would initiate, in an unpretentious and at the same time monumental way, a healing process of ‘the disastrous and unscrupulous destruction of our planet’ (Demarco 1987:

17). As natural elements, the oak tree and basalt represent two divergent histories: the stone relates to our past (prehistoric), emerging from the center of the earth, transformed from liquid magma to cooled-down mineral, untreated by human beings, but finally shaped into a symmetrical pentagonal form. Beuys’ view of the future of this work was that: ‘In a few years’ time, stone and tree will be in balance, and in twenty to thirty years’ time we may see that gradually, the stone has become an adjunct at the foot of the oak or whatever tree it may be’ (Scholz 1986: 32).

DIA Foundation for the Arts (based in New York City) substantially supported Joseph Beuys’ action *7000 Oaks*: subsequent to *Documenta 7* it purchased 200 tree certificates from the Free International University. To mark the opening of their new exhibition space in Chelsea in 1988, DIA set up five trees – pin oak, red oak, elm honey locust, linde and gingko – with basalt stones from the pile

in Kassel in front of their building on 22nd Street, one year after the completion of the *7000 Oak* project, and two years after Beuys' death (Fig. 2). The project was launched in collaboration with the City of New York, Parks and Recreation, the New York Tree Trust and with support from a few private galleries.

To comply with New York City regulations, the trees were planted with a heavy metal collar around their trunks, and the basalt rods were set firmly in cement. The final effect, however well intended, clearly undermined Beuys' essential idea: there was no way that the tree and stone could ever grow together. So, what had happened to the artist's concept and how was his vision compromised? Even if the basalt stones, the substantial material carriers of the idea, had arrived by ship in New York City, and the appropriate trees sourced from New York nurseries, somewhere along the way between Kassel and New York the fundamental idea of the artwork would have been lost.

Authenticity and criteria

'Authenticity is a place of significance in a multifaceted field of associations. It is created by artistic intentions, concepts and purposes but also by expectations, expertise and historical context' (Reck 1997). Authenticity as a 'place', as proposed by Hans Ulrich Reck, wants to be discovered and maintained. How can we navigate to this place and see the artwork as a true and reliable historical document? How can we recover the artist's intention and the artwork's aesthetic function? And what can we as conservators – the surgeons, physicians and psychiatrists to this multilayered species that we call art – do (or not do) to maintain the work's integrity over a period of time? To identify this 'place' we have to continuously review the following criteria: the idea (IDEA) or concept, based on the artist's intention; physical matter – or combination of materials; process of making; an aesthetic form, abstract or figurative; context – historical, cultural, site-specific.



Figure 2 Extended project of Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks*, 22nd Street, New York City, planted in 1988. (Photo: C. Scheidemann.)

A work of art is truthful or reliable – and this is what we call ‘authentic’ – if, through its form and material, it transmits to its viewer the intention of the artist in its intellectual and historical context. To put it another way: from looking at a physical work of art it should be possible for the informed viewer to see the concept, intellectual origin and the historical and social context in which the work was made.

While looking at contemporary art, and trying to understand its meaning, we often ask ourselves: ‘what is it made of?’ The American sculptor Robert Gober explained in an interview: ‘I get very frustrated when people ask me: “What does your sculpture mean?” I respond by talking about what it’s made of and they get impatient, as though I’m avoiding the question. But I feel that unless you know what it’s physically made of, you can’t begin to understand it. A lot of times the metaphors are embedded right in the medium and the material that you work with’ (Gober and Celmins 2005: 96).

However, the relationship between meaning and material has not always been so valued. In his ‘Dogma of Ideas’, Plato (427–347 BC) denounces material as a ‘necessary evil’, and as the ‘lowest part in a work of art’. The most important and significant part of an artwork would be the IDEA or concept – something fundamentally immaterial. The material is just necessary to visualize the idea. Some critics would even state that a work of art exists in its purest form just in its concept and before being realized (materialized). Art theory and aesthetics, until the mid-19th century, examined almost exclusively the dialectic dispute (*Spannungsverhaeltnis*) between ‘content’ and ‘form’, whereas the material was seen as ‘*quantité négligéable*’ or even worse – as a ‘*quantité négative*’.

This shift of emphasis towards the material make-up of an artwork, at least in the Western art tradition, began in the early 20th century with the rise of constructivism and DADA, and found its liberation in the Fluxus movement in the 1960s. It continues to permeate the production and reception of art of today.

The ‘iconology of materials’ as an academic tool to identify artists’ strategies has become an essential commodity in the discourse of contemporary art, and has been established through publications by Monika Wagner in *Das Material in der Kunst* (2001) and in Martha Buskirk’s *The Contingent Object in Contemporary Art* (2005).

Joseph Beuys: *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1983–85)

One year after Joseph Beuys started *7000 Oaks* in Kassel, he created another body of work that developed from a similar idea. The work, called *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1983–85), was first shown in Harald Szeemann’s infamous show *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* in Zurich in 1983 (Fig. 3). Here, Beuys again utilized the basalt stones as signifiers of pre-historic matter transformed by energy – in this case, the release of energy – and had a cone carved out of one long side of every stone. Each cone was then wrapped in a piece of felt and replanted into its corresponding hole, in addition to some gray clay.

In 1984, the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen purchased one of three versions of the work. A fourth version, now in Tate’s collection, was assembled posthumously. Beuys himself installed the basalt stones in the Haus der Kunst in Munich differently than he had laid them out in the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf earlier in 1983. For the new installation he chose the last (dead end) in a sequence of rooms on the second floor of the Haus der Kunst, which, at that time, hosted the modern and contemporary collection of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen. The room had been minimally modified by setting up frontal walls with the same width so that the viewer had relatively narrow access to the piece.

The stones were installed in Munich in a configuration that Beuys described as a ‘Sea, in the Haus der Kunst beating against a rocky shore’ (Klüser 2007: 39–40). They were placed



Figure 3 *The End of the 20th Century*, 1984, Bayerische Staatgalerie, Sammlung Munich (Photo: Isa Paeffgen.)

in parallel lines, at angles of various degrees, some leaning against others, as well as one standing upright. The process of how the room was chosen and how the work was set is described best by the philosopher Eckart Förster:

The museum visitor, having left his daily life behind him, ascended the spacious staircase, traversed the approximately eighty meter long south gallery. Suddenly, the installation loomed into the view. Because of the dividing wall that had been raised, he could not have seen the installation in its entirety earlier from a distance. Going further in the same direction or walking around the installation was not an option. He could only turn back. With that Beuys engineered something that since the classical times is known as *epoché*, the point where the direction of a movement must halt and a new direction has not yet begun. Initially, this term designated the end of the agricultural plot where the plow was turned (Förster 2007: 68–9).

For Förster, the term has since attained its foremost significance in the metaphorical sense: in classical skepticism, *epoché* describes

the suspension of all judgments. It is thus a point of pause, the coming-to-a-standstill of prevalent tendencies and meanings held until now, before something new can mark the new course of direction. Beuys succeeded in staging this feeling in the double sense: *outwardly*, in that the visitor could not continue at this point in his walk through the gallery; and *inwardly*, in that the installation invoked the feeling that one's customary ideas would not take one further, and that all judgments must now be suspended. An understanding of *The End of the Twentieth Century* would thus herald the beginning of a new direction in thinking (Förster 2007: 68–9).

With the opening of the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich in 2002, it was decided that – together with all other parts of the modern and contemporary collection – the installation needed to be relocated from the Haus der Kunst to the new museum (Förster 2007: 68–9). Since Beuys had passed away in 1986, and specifications for the original installation did not exist, a way had to be found to move the 44 stones and to preserve as much as possible of the meaning and significance of the work as originally installed by Beuys (Willisch 2007).

The new home for this site-sensitive installation was in one of the side galleries on the

second floor of the Pinakothek der Moderne, bigger than the original space and forgoing the intended dramaturgy of access. Instead of reinterpreting the work for the new space, the museum team concluded that it might be best to measure the work with the aid of geodetic engineers and relocate it in exactly the same position. Knowing Beuys' specific predilection for architecturally charismatic 'dead ends', he might not have agreed to his work being in that particular room in the first place. In addition, judging from previous situations in which he had to resite a work of art, had he still been alive, he most probably would have installed the piece differently, reacting to the new site and its architecture.

For the lucky people who had the chance to see the work in the original installation, and I count myself among them, the work at the new site has lost its power of confrontation with the elemental chaos. The 'sea is not beating against the rocky shore' anymore. Given Beuys' absence and the lack of any instruction, the choice to maintain the work's material and exact physical configuration, and to replicate the original condition, was a result of an unavoidable compromise. Alternatively, to reconfigure the work in the new space, with a nondescript floor and a generic ceiling, and to reinvent the energy of the primary site through even the best-intended adjustment, would have been in conflict with professional codes of ethics.¹

The inevitable questions about the limits of such compromises arise:

- Where do we look for measures of authenticity and how do we judge the essential failure or success of finding its locus?
- Do the concessions lead to corruption of the work or of the conservator?

More and more, especially as we deal with contextual works and installations, the task of a contemporary conservator is shifting from mere maintenance, focused primarily on the preservation of the physical artwork/material towards the challenge of reinterpretation.

One can choose to be blind to such challenge, and avoid it. The risk, however, frequently results in the disappearance of work from view altogether into opaque warehouses and vaults. An acknowledgement of the challenge is vital for all involved, and a discussion forum for that recognition needs to be established.

Authenticity in installation is a major issue since any installation addresses more than a collection of physical objects. It concerns itself with relationships to a particular space, and it sets off a chain reaction of dynamic behaviors (Scholte and te Brake-Baldock 2007). This is not to say, of course, that a painting cannot lose its authenticity – the ensemble of the frame, the varnish, the topography of the surface and the coloration, its thematic context in a sequence of other paintings.

'Site-specificity' is not an invention of the 20th century but rather a concept or term that describes in general how artists might think and conceive their work. Already in medieval times, liturgical succession generated a powerful and meaningful relationship between individual parts of a clerical interior. A good example of a work created specifically for one particular location is the *Englischer Gruss* ('Angel's Greeting'), a 5m tall, wood-carved masterpiece, created by the artist Veit Stoss for St Laurenz Church in Nürnberg in 1517 (Fig. 4). In the centre of the ornamented rosary, the polychromed sculptures of Archangel Gabriel and Virgin Mary are facing the altar space and the stained glass windows above the altar towards the choir. Stoss had painted the light reflections of the choir windows in the pupils of the eyes of Archangel Gabriel, and thus defined the crucial relationship between the group of figures and the light that represented celestial energy and empowerment.

Extreme preoccupation with the specificity of a work's location in recent times has been well illustrated by the controversy surrounding Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981–88). As soon as the sculpture – a 36.5m (120ft) long and 3.6m (12ft) high curving and gently tilting Cor Ten steel wall – was installed at the Federal Plaza in



Figure 4 Veit Stoss, *Englischer Gruss* ('Angel's Greeting'), detail: head of Gabriel with reflection of church window in the eyes. (Photo: from Johannes Taubert, *Farbige Skulpturen*, Callway, 1978.)

New York City, it was contested by the commissioning General Services Administration and the case brought to court (Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk 1990). The judges' ruling in 1989, after a three-day public hearing, was to remove the sculpture and to transport it to a government parking lot in Brooklyn. Serra considered: 'To remove *Tilted Arc* is ... to destroy it' (Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk 1990: 67). Although this highly context-dependent work is now destroyed, the public discussion around it helped to establish the idea that a work of art often is considerably more than just the components of its material in the consciousness of the average viewer.

Jason Rhoades: *Black Pussy* (2005)

One artist whose arrangements and environments push the possibilities of reinstall-

lation to its limits is Jason Rhoades. Rhoades would challenge curators and conservators with installations of sheer quantity of material and complexity of meaning. In an interview with the curator Eva Meyer-Hermann, he explained the emphasis of his work: 'To juggle the impossible was always an issue throughout my work – to take three objects, like a rubber ball, a chain saw and a live African elephant, and try to juggle' (Zdenek *et al.* 2000: 47).

While an installation was growing it was open to suggestions, change and even to replacement of its crucial elements. Once Rhoades decided that the work had achieved its final stage he would define it as an object that could not be altered. In 2005, he rented a former photo studio in the historic Los Angeles district, Little Philippines, on Beverly Hills Boulevard. The 914.4m² (3000 sq. ft) space was a test site for an installation he was planning for a future exhibition in London. The resulting arrangement of more than 2500 objects invoking an atmosphere of an oriental cross-cultural party space, titled *Black Pussy* (Fig. 5), became the last installment of a trilogy that includes *Meccatuna* (2003) and *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage* (2004).

Most of the objects in this assemblage were purchased in bulk online or acquired from a seized Egyptian sea container. Although the setup could seem relatively chaotic, there was a precise order to the assembled elements with five core parts: 50 beaver felt cowboy hats, 100 hooka pipes, 100 dreamcatchers (native American fetish objects used to filter dreams), 37 Chinese scholars' rocks and 80 black neon signs representing synonyms for female genitalia; an ongoing project to create a cross-cultural compendium, dangling on their electrical cords from the ceiling. There were also 35 secondary elements: great numbers of faux Egyptian vases, Chinese knock-off versions of Venetian glass vegetables and fruits and ceramic donkey toys which were made per Rhoades' instructions by a Mexican fabricator.



Figure 5 Jason Rhoades, *Black Pussy*, installation, 2006, Los Angeles. (Photo: Josh White.)

The purchased number of these objects was divided into two equal parts: one for London and one for Los Angeles. The layout and overall narrative of the installation included a stage for performances, seats and benches, colorful cloth rugs, a macramé object and a bed. The work was executed mainly by two of his assistants. The LA environment held 10 soirées during the period of 31 March through 23 July 2006, when a selectively invited crowd would participate in the performances on the stage, weave the macramé after detailed instructions and contribute more pussy words during the 'Pussy-Word Harvesting' part of the party. In July of 2006, the artist and his New York dealer David Zwirner agreed that the entire work would be shown as a 'sculpture' with no more soirées, in New York in November of the same year. On 1 August 2006, Jason Rhoades died and the show was postponed. One year later, however, after serious discussions – which included his widow, his assistants, the gallery and a conservator – the sculptural version of the installation went on view at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York.

Since the transformation from dynamic environment to sculpture was initiated and planned out by Rhoades himself, its reassembly could follow the artist's instructions and rely on precise documentation (photos, film, drawings) executed by his assistants and hired professionals before and after the artist's death. During his lifetime, Jason Rhoades had always wanted a conservator to be involved in his work but eventually always found a creative way to solve a problem before the conservator was even called. Now, after he is gone, there are too many questions to be answered regarding the maintenance of the installation and the authenticity of his work.

The extraction of *Black Pussy* from its place of birth and 'replanting' of it, temporarily, in a highly regarded gallery space in Chelsea created concerns not only about the fragility of individual parts but also about the integrity of this multi-layered work. The private conservator in this case has a different role from a museum conservator as he is often the first to collect information from the artist and its original condition before it enters the realm of the museum world.

Conclusion

Sometimes restraint, as opposed to action, is required to maintain the object's authenticity. We recently received a 1000-year-old Bura clay urn, a part of a contemporary collection, for a possible replacement of one of its missing ears.² The request provoked a serious discussion in our studio. The sculpture was in perfect condition except for a few inherent cracks on the bottom of the hollow part, presumably existing since the initial firing process. It was obvious from the clear and clean break of the missing ear that the damage was a recent loss. As soon as we started to consider the treatment of the work, we all felt quite reticent about replacing the missing ear. We felt that the work's innate beauty and integrity as a cultural artifact, 1000 years old, were not affected by the ear's absence.

Coming from a completely different time period and remote cultural context, the object raised many questions about what we, as conservators, do to works of contemporary art – exchanging motors, replacing extra parts, filling losses in sculptural elements but not broken ears of ancient ritual objects. Ultimately, it also demonstrates just how much other works with which we deal on a daily basis do in fact require treatment to return them to their full artistic presence and aesthetic function. The discussion resulting from the confrontation with the Bura object clarified our view on the complexity of a conservator's role. It highlighted the responsibility we have towards the integrity of the work at hand, how sensitive we need to be to all its facets: its concept, physical materials and historical, cultural significance.

Notes

1. See <http://aic.stanford.edu/pubs/ethics.html>.
2. The examination of the Bura clay pot was undertaken by the team at Contemporary Conservation Ltd. New York.

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