

Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art

Edited by IWONA SZMELTER

The Knowledge Tree



 **Archetype
Publications**

First published 2012 by Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw
and Archetype Publications Ltd.

Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 5
00-068 Warsaw
Poland
www.asp.waw.pl

Archetype Publications Ltd.
6 Fitzroy Square
London W1T 5HJ
United Kingdom
www.archetype.co.uk

© Copyright 2012 Authors, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw
and Archetype Publications Ltd.

ISBN 978-83-61558-87-3
ISBN 978-1-904982-81-4

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publishers.

Front cover: Alina Szapocznikow, *Dessert III*, 1971, assemblage
(created out of ready-made objects, i.e. a porcelain cake stand,
which holds a composition of three polyester-styrene
mass-coloured, deep-dyed moulds of female breasts),
18 cm (height) x 24 cm (width) x 25 cm (length),
private collection – seen during conservation,
consisting of removal of palimpsests.
Photo: Iwona Szmelter

Designed and typeset by Paweł Osiał
and headmade studio, Warsaw, Poland

Printed and bound in Poland
by Drukarnia Dimograf Sp. z o.o.



HILKKA HIIOP

What Is to Be Preserved in Contemporary Art? A Question for the Curator or the Conservator?

ABSTRACT | Museums and collections of contemporary art are increasingly facing new challenges with regard to the appropriate long-term conservation of their holdings. The objects to be preserved are characterized by an enormous range of materials and ways of combining them. Due to the wide diversity, and often mutual incompatibility of employed materials, the preservation of contemporary art collections is technically difficult. Even more complex than technical problems is the task of understanding the relationship between a given work's physical and conceptual properties.

The only acceptable basis for preservation of contemporary art is an awareness of the multiple values, concepts and physical preservation/conservation possibilities of each particular work. The different materials used in the production of contemporary art and the ideas they are representing are tending to change their initial form rapidly, thus making it difficult if not impossible to reconstruct them later on. It is therefore crucial to establish appropriate conditions for the preservation of the conceptual and physical integrity of the work of art at a very early stage, possibly along with the acquiring process. This is also the moment when effective interaction between curator and conservator is required.

Through some case studies from the contemporary art collection at the KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia, the following paper provides the conservator's view, regarding the acquisition and "musealization" process of contemporary art. It aims at pointing out the needs and problems relating to the preservation, future display and, if necessary, adequate conservation-restoration of the collection of contemporary art.

WHAT IS TO BE PRESERVED IN CONTEMPORARY ART? A QUESTION FOR THE CURATOR

OR THE CONSERVATOR? | The following presentation provides the conservator's view regarding the acquisition and musealization process of contemporary art. It does not deal with the question of collecting policies, i.e. it does not try to interfere with the question: what to collect? – as this is evidently the curator's responsibility. The question to be posed is, first of all, related to collecting strategy, i.e. how to collect?, with the goal of trying to define who is responsible for that.

The structure of a museum is commonly built up as a chain in which each professional unit is able to function more or less independently. This linear model functions effectively in the case of traditional art: the professional activities of the curator, the collection manager and the conservator are clearly defined and they operate successfully even if direct communication is minimal. The boundaries of the various professions are based on a clear distinction between the non-material (i.e. meaning of the work in any sense) and physical/material nature of art. Apparently curators/art historians are responsible for the former part and conservators for the latter. In a conventional museum system, the conservator enters the scene only in the phase when the work of art requires some kind of physical intervention. The role of the conservator is to perform a range of actions related to the physical entity of the work of art.

Unlike traditional art, contemporary art objects are often characterized by the use of a huge variety of materials and ways of combining them. Due to the diversity and often mutual incompatibility of employed materials, it is evident that the material conservation of contemporary art is a complicated technical task. But even more complex than these technical aspects is the difficulty of distinguishing the material and non-material dimensions or, in other words, the physical and conceptual level of an object. For that reason, the fact that conservators exclusively deal with the consequences of physical degradation creates an enormous dilemma. On one hand, information on the complex meanings of the work might not be available anymore. On the other hand, the conservator might not be able to carry out an adequate interpretation and to understand the relations between the material and non-material levels of the given work. In order to minimize the lack of information and the risk of losing an understanding of the work of art, it is crucial to establish the appropriate conditions for the preservation of both its conceptual and physical integrity. The best moment to do that is during the acquisition process, when memories are still alive and information sources still active. The establishment of appropriate preservation conditions becomes an important step in preventive conservation management and it must be considered as a part of the collecting policy (which focuses on the question: what to collect?) and can be defined as the acquiring strategy (which focuses on the question: how to collect?).

Acquiring strategy for contemporary art | When acquiring a work of art for a museum collection, we usually think of the physical object. In the case of traditional art, there is no doubt that apart from the physical object, intrinsic values are also acquired, relating to its iconography, history, style etc. even if not evident at the time. In the case of contemporary art, the meanings, concepts, associations etc. are often not directly related to the physical object and can reach far beyond the object as such. Additional meanings may also lie in the sound, light, motion, smell or in the temporal and spatial context of the initial work, in the personal or intellectual dimension, in the continuity of the process, or in the context of (art historical) interpretations etc. As a result of acquiring such an artwork without full interpretation and documentation of the non-object part of it, we might face, after some time, a situation of storage areas being filled with undefined objects or meaningless pieces of art work. In order to explain it better, two selected case studies from the contemporary art collection of the Art Museum of Estonia are given.

ERKI KASEMETS, *CAN'T (CAN NET) AND LIFE-FILE* | The first artist I would like to introduce in the context of this topic is Erki Kasemets.

The major part of his oeuvre has common characteristics, such as:

– using ready-made details and waste products. Therefore, his art is defined by art critics primarily as “trash art” and his working method as “recycling”;

- depending on the particular work of art, ready-made objects are more or less treated (colored, painted etc.) by the artist and set in an artistic context;
 - his works are characterized by continuous repetition and accumulation of one type of element – “piling art”;
 - by means of those repetitive elements, he collects and documents time – his personal time and/or time in general;
 - mostly his working method is centered on process and not on product, i.e. the objective of his art is not to come up with final results (i.e. works of art) but to continue the process without defined ends in terms of results or time.
- I would like to give a more detailed description and analysis of two of his works (projects), one belonging (partially) to the collection of the Art Museum of Estonia, the other one not within a collection yet.

I.

In the case of the first work, it is actually not so much the work of art itself, but the image creation method, based on painted tin cans, that we are talking about. The system was developed by Kasemets, who himself calls it *KOMPURKER* or *CAN'T (CAN NET)* and defines it as follows:

KOMPURKER is a system consisting of modules – cans – which makes it possible to create screen images. Theoretically, each can is a part of this large system. There are endless opportunities to make and break the images. The images can be based on “pattern sheets”¹

In 1993, he started to create installations based on this method, followed by many gallery exhibitions and installations in public spaces (both outdoors and indoors). The bases for installations are hand-drawn sketches of the pattern and, having a collection of thousands of colored cans, he is able to install and reinstall endless versions of “ornaments”.

In 1996, the Art Museum of Estonia acquired two installations from the exhibition “Recycling of Time”. The acquired works are titled *Perpetuation* and *Recycling of Time III*.

Having this kind of object in our collection at the Art Museum of Estonia, we have to consider some essential aspects of this work:

As mentioned before, Kasemets’ primary objective is not to produce well-designed and finished objects, but to use the stacking method he has worked out. In the words of Kasemets: “... it is not a single static object, but rather a huge environment offering endless possibilities – no matter how big and no matter which cans are used together.”²

As the works stand in the museum collection as finished objects, the processual level is interrupted. In the words of the artist: “Since these works are now in the museum, it feels as if they have been pulled out of the process.”

In order to preserve the objects (including future display, re-installation, possible damages etc.) a series of questions arises:



1. Mart Viljus, *Trademarks (TM)*. Work contains food and other perishable substances.

Photo: Mart Viljus, 2007.

2. Mart Viljus, *Trademarks (TM)*.

Detail. Photo: Mart Viljus, 2007.

3. Mart Viljus, *Trademarks (TM)*. Musealization process: artist emptying the containers.

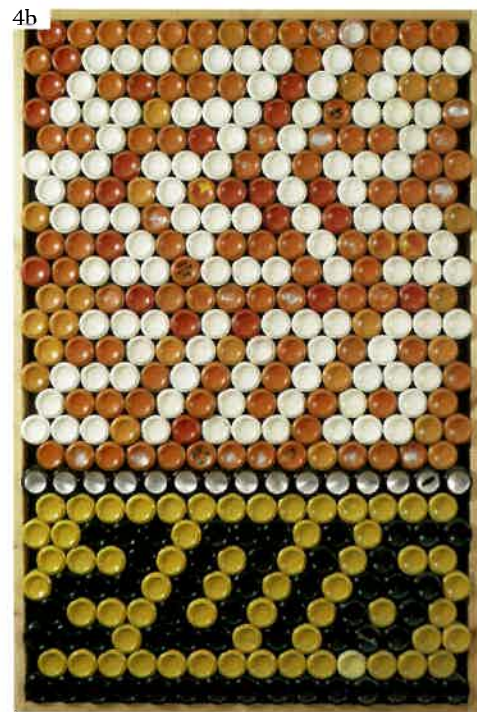
Photo: Hilikka Hiiop, 2007.

4. a, b. Erki Kasemets, *Recycling of time III*. 1996. Painted tin cans. (295 x 100).

Photo: Stanislav Stepaško

5. Erki Kasemets, *Life-file*. Installation changing in the course of time. Painted milk cartons. (Exhibition: "PLAISIRS DE L'IMAGINATION" in Tours, 2008. Photo: Hilikka Hiiop

6. Erki Kasemets, *Life-file*. Painted milk cartons. (Exhibition: "Polygon Theatre: Work." Tallinn City Gallery, 1999). Photo: Erki Kasemets



- How much does the object or its single elements have the value of being original /authentic?
- Are the single elements replaceable – to what extent, by whom and according to what?
- Is the work reproducible, re-installable, re-creatable? And if yes, by whom and according to what?
- How much should the final object in a museum collection reflect the initial idea of endless modification possibilities included in the installation? And how can this be done?

II.

The other work by Kasemets poses similar questions and makes the dilemma of possible musealization even more evident. Being probably the most famous and characteristic work by the artist, it has for some time been under consideration for acquisition by the museum. The same dilemma is likely one of the reasons why it has not been purchased yet.

The work called *Life-file* is, first of all, a process of documenting time. It is a sort of personal diary of the artist – nearly every day the artist has painted one tetra pack, thus recording his life. It is an ongoing process which Kasemets started in 1994. At present, around 8000 packages have been painted. The work has been displayed in numerous exhibitions, where it has usually been installed by the artist himself, using different forms, concepts and amounts of single elements. If the museum were to acquire this work of art, immediately an essential question would arise: how to acquire the ongoing process? Should the artist come every morning to the museum and paint one package? Or once per week/per month/per year bring another pile of packages? To guarantee the continuity, should it be expressed in some contract or official agreement between the artist and museum? Can it be acquired as a fragment or only as archive documentation? How do we avoid the risk of just collecting a pile of empty, although nicely painted, milk containers.

MART VILJUS, *TRADEMARKS (TM)* (1997–2006) | In 2006, the Art Museum of Estonia decided to buy the (neo)conceptual work *Trademarks (TM)* by Mart Viljus. The work in its original version was created in 1997. Being “renewed” in different versions and adjusted for the context, it has been included in many curated projects. *Trademarks (TM)* is a set of shelves that the audience is used to seeing in a supermarket and the shelves are lined with dozens of different bulk products. The conceptual dislocation of the work lies in the trademarks familiar to consumers, which the artist has mixed up: thus the audience can see OMO muesli, Pedigree cornflakes, Coca-Cola ketchup, canned fish from Snickers, etc.

When such a work is included in the museum collection, a highly relevant question emerges: which context(s) should be chosen to retain the work?

The idea, that Mart Viljus himself has attributed to the work, is the simple manipulation of people, soaked in symbols of consumer society, generating an effect of estrangement in them. Quoting the artist: “The most important goal is to disorientate the audience for a moment.”³

However, the art world interprets the work mainly in the contexts of time and place, where parallel to the dislocated presentation of the world of consumption, the work also observes the infantile admiration of anything Western by people living in the newly independent Estonia.

In addition to the artist’s aspirations and the space-time connections of creating the work, an important role is also played by his biographical contexts, or the interpretations created in the framework of different curated projects. For each exhibition the author has adjusted the “physical message” of the work to the consumer awareness of the audience. For example, the Kiasma (Finland, Helsinki) exhibition had a series of brand names familiar to the Finnish audience (e.g. the logo of Nokia was placed on a Pepsi Cola bottle).

In the case of this work, the way in which it is exhibited carries a lot of importance. The author has skilfully worked with brand names on the computer: he has scanned the designs of original labels, switched different trademarks, printed out fake labels and glued them back on the containers. The dislocation and the effect of estrangement are based primarily on this technical exactness. Therefore *Trademarks (TM)* cannot be viewed as ready-made art, where the artist would probably not intervene in its exhibition.

Now that the museum has decided to buy the work, many practical and theoretical questions emerge:

- First of all, how can a work consisting of perishable foodstuff or other material be preserved?
- Secondly, in which space-time context could the work be musealized, i.e. should the work be preserved as a historical document or should it retain its conceptual acuteness?

Based on the author’s intention of creating the effect of estrangement in people soaked in the signs of consumer society, the work should seem as topical to the modern audience as it did to the audience ten years ago. It is clear that mass production articles change; what today strikes us as a dislocation, may at best seem to the audience of tomorrow to be an interesting rarity of the consumer industry. In order to retain the primary message of the work, it should constantly conform to the surrounding consumer environment, as it has done during the past ten years.

On the other hand, the art world has attributed a time and place specific background to the work, presenting the ecstatic confusion of Estonian people at the arrival of the Western “new freedom” in a critical-ironic way. Is the work expected to be preserved as a historic document?

The musealization process | Both examples show the necessity of context and interpretation, without which the works tend to lose their conceptual and contextual meanings. Therefore, in my opinion, the musealization of a work of contemporary art requires the full interpretation of all possible meanings of the particular work of art in order to create the concept of musealization and preservation, both of the material and immaterial contexts of the work. This means creating and archiving a record which collects the maximum information about the work.

Coming back to the above-mentioned case studies, I will provide some examples of possible documentation formats which may help to preserve the legibility and understanding of those works in future.

Kasemets. Ten years after acquisition, the contextual value of the works have somewhat dispersed, because the answers to the above-mentioned questions cannot be found by referring exclusively to the physical object as such. In discussion and collaboration with the artist, a record was created, which might help to recreate the legibility of the work: written and photographic documentation compiled by the artist and titled *Memoirs of the cans*, which reflects the (hi) story and definition of the *KOMPURKER* system, audiovisually recorded and transcribed interview, and fragments of the animations which the artist created in order to visualize the principle of the module system.

Mart Viljus Trademarks. As the work contains food and other perishable substances, the duty of finding a way to preserve the acquired work in the museum environment was assigned to the conservator.

Since the substances inside the containers were not important to the work, all containers holding perishable contents were emptied.

Although a technical solution was devised for storing the work, a substantial question remained: what would be the context of preserving the work?

It was decided that the work would be categorised as a historical “document” (although the time was chosen randomly) but, as a compromise to preserve its novelty, the artist included all the original digital files of the fake labels in the purchase, as well as the instructions on how to renew the labels in case they should yellow, fade etc. – it is clear that the work carries a meaning, whether historical or modern, only when it looks “fresh”; otherwise it would at best become an object of nostalgia, or at worst, a musealized heap of garbage. And if empty containers kept in the museum storage area can at some point of time be regarded as ready-made objects “with no original value”, the work can be recreated without direct help from the artist. All one needs is to go to a supermarket, put the necessary consumption items in a shopping cart, change the labels to those manipulated by the artist and reconstruct the work according to the photo documentation.

Musealizing *Trademarks (TM)*, one of many interpretations of the work was fixed, which inevitably originated from the time-space context of preserving the work, as well as from the subjective vision of the conservator. But contexts and interpretations are changing. Therefore, the possibility of re-interpreting the work has been left open, so that future interpretations do not necessarily need to be based on the decisions made at the present moment: with the help of the artist it is possible to “modernize” the work, as well as to return to the original documentary value and to the different biographical levels of the work.

CONCLUSION | At this point I will return to the title at the beginning of this article: who decides what is to be preserved in contemporary art: the curator or the conservator? Following the conventional scheme of a museum, the conservator is responsible only for the physical part of the work of art and usually only when a need for any kind of physical intervention arises. If no adequate information and documentation is archived along with the work, any conservation-restoration action might lead to its misinterpretation. Therefore, as mentioned, it is crucial to establish, along with the acquisition of the work, appropriate conditions such as documentation, for the preservation of its physical and conceptual integrity. As shown above, the clearly defined boundaries between the material and non-material part of the art, being open to all possible relations between material and meaning, are blurred. So, the traditional division between the material part of the work, which should be the responsibility of the conservator, and the non-material part, which used to be exclusively the domain of art historians/curators, no longer functions. Therefore, along with the shift in the nature of art, the linear chain system of museum professionals tends to shift as well. The clear answer to the question of whose responsibility it is to decide on the format of preserving contemporary art in the museum context is therefore ambiguous. In my opinion, only through close and intertwining interdisciplinary collaboration and discussion, involving the artist and different museum professionals, can an adequate and sustainable result in acquiring, musealizing and preserving contemporary art be achieved.

NOTES

- 1 E. Kasemets, *Memoirs of the Cans* (description and documentation of the work of art compiled by the artist)-. Archived in the digital archive of the Art Museum of Estonia: http://digikogu.ekm.ee/admin/site_modules_grp/adm_image/restaureerimised/session_id-est/newwin-middle_left/addedit-6.html (accessed 6 November 2010).
- 2 Interview with Erki Kasemets, 21 February 2008. Interviewers: Hilikka Hiiop, Annika Rääm. Video file of the interview is archived in the Art Museum of Estonia.
- 3 Interview with Mart Viljus, 14 February 2007. Interviewers: Hilikka Hiiop, Annika Rääm. Video file of the interview is archived in the Art Museum of Estonia.