

# OBSOLESCENCE, MATERIALS AND AUTHENTICITY. THE OPINION OF CÉCILE DAZORD AND MARIE-HÉLÈNE BREUIL

**Rosario Llamas Pacheco**

*Universidad Politécnica de Valencia*

**Autor de contacto:** Rosario Llamas Pacheco, rllamas@crbc.upv.es

**ABSTRACT:** *The French group INCCA met in Marseilles in February 2014. Through this meeting we had the opportunity to talk with Cecile Dazord and Marie-Hélène Breuil, organizers of the event. Both researchers are involved in the conservation of contemporary art for years. Thanks to its extensive experience we could think deeply about some of the most debated issues concerning the conservation of contemporary art.*

**KEYWORDS:** obsolescence, authenticity, essence, contemporary art, restoration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The INCCA-f research group, the French branch of INCCA (International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art) held their second meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> February 2014 in Marseille.

This meeting attracted a large number of professionals concerned with the conservation and restoration of contemporary art. The theme for the event was the documentation of contemporary works of art, with the title of the meeting being “Documentation technique-Techniques de documentation”. The meeting programme included a visit to Marseille’s FRAC-PACA centre.

The issue of the documentation of contemporary works of art has taken on more and more importance, as their characteristics are such that they may be lost to us if they are not properly documented.

The documentation of a work of art must take into account its material characteristics as well as any conceptual considerations. If such information is not recorded appropriately, essential elements of the work of art may be lost.

The two co-ordinators of the INCCA-f group, Cécile Dazord and Marie Hélène Breuil, were interviewed in order to reflect on these issues, to discuss the search for the essence of contemporary art works, to consider where their authenticity resides, and to explore how to approach in the right way the documentation of art works which are susceptible to change, are transitory or even ephemeral.

## 2. INTERVIEW TO CÉCILE DAZORD AND MARIE-HÉLÈNE BREUIL

Marseille, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

**Rosario Llamas. Cécile, tell me about your educational background.**

**Cécile Dazord.** Well, I began by studying classics, and then I branched out into the history of art and, finally, I studied curatorship at the Institut National du Patrimoine, specialising in contemporary art.

**R. L. Did you study in Paris? Which university?**

**C.D.** Yes, in Paris, although I began my studies in Lyon and Marseille. I then moved to the Sorbonne in Paris to study classics and the history of art. The Institut National du Patrimoine is also in Paris.

**R. L. What about you, Marie-Hélène? Where did you undertake your studies?**

**Marie-Hélène Breuil.** I studied the history of art, but I also studied for two years at ESAA, the fine art school in Avignon, spending one year on art, and then I studied painting restoration, a subject which had just begun to be taught at ESAA in Avignon. This was the beginning of conservation and restoration studies, the starting point for these disciplines in Avignon in the late 70s and early 80s. I only studied this for a year, but it enabled me to become familiar with the principles of conservation and restoration. Afterwards, I decided to study the history of art and specialise in contemporary art.

**R. L. Where do you work now?**

**M.H.B.** At ESBA, the fine art school in Tours, and I teach the history of art in the Department of Sculpture Conservation and Restoration.

**R. L. Cécile, how many years have you been in your current post at the C2RMF?**

**C.D.** Since 2006.

**R.L. And you, Marie-Hélène at ESBA?**

**M.H.B.** Since 1989. It's a long time, really.

**R.L. Cécile, you have specialised in contemporary art, but within this broad field, how would you define the specific area or issue? What do you work on specifically?**

**C.D.** Well, initially I was very interested in the 70s and I started to focus on Brazil and Argentina when I was curator of Strasbourg museum, where I worked for five years, from 2000 to 2005. But from 2006 onwards, I started to become interested in conservation with regard to the issue of obsolescence, and now I'm working on contemporary art and technological obsolescence.

**R. L. And what about you, Marie-Hélène? What's your specialism?**

**M.H.B.** I actually have two areas I specialise in. As an art historian, I work on a French artist, Claude Rutault, who has a rather peculiar artistic output, as he undertakes theoretical work on painting which is also based on the written word. For this reason, there's no need for the artist to actually create the art works himself. In other words, his creations can actually be executed by other people. His works are not definitively permanent, being susceptible to change over time. They can change colour, size, or format. I find this very interesting indeed.

I am also a lecturer in the Department of Conservation and Restoration at ESBA in Tours, in the Department of Restoration. Since the 90s, I've made the effort to introduce material on the conservation of contemporary art because, when I came to Tours, there was a real focus on sculpture of a rather classic nature. I preferred to start to think about contemporary works, and that has given me the opportunity to develop approaches to the issues surrounding the conservation and restoration of contemporary art works.

**R. L. What were the first projects you worked on, Cécile? Can you tell us about some of the projects you have undertaken and ones which you are particularly satisfied with?**

**C.D.** The problem of obsolescence and its consequences for the conservation of art works was a novel one at the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration de Musées de France (C2RMF). It took me two years to pin an area down and to undertake a project and develop a method at the same time.

In conjunction with a colleague who specialised in colorimetry, I started working on silver-based film and on the modifications which scanning such film can introduce, as part of funded research projects which have led to the publication of articles and reports. So,

we considered a very specific area regarding the conservation of silver-based film.

For the last two years, I've been working on a study on the conservation of art works which include neon light sources, which should be completed by the end of 2014 and on which we hope to publish something at some stage in 2015. This entails a more overarching and synthetic approach compared to what we had done before. Becoming better acquainted with the production processes, including those that are of an industrial nature, seems to us to be an essential part of becoming better acquainted with, conserving, and understanding the art works themselves. Far from being separate branches, we believe that production and conservation should go hand in hand, as part of continuous chain which should be seen as one process – otherwise, there is a risk of losing information of the utmost importance. We would like to apply this approach to other techniques where conservation is problematic (fluorescent tubes, incandescent light bulbs, CRT monitors, etc.).

At the same time, it is necessary to reflect upon the very notion of obsolescence and the relationship between art and technique. Marie-Hélène and I edited the May 2013 edition of the C2RMF journal, *Technè*, entitled *Conserver l'art contemporain à l'ère de l'obsolescence technologique*<sup>1</sup>. This has constituted the first step towards the determination of this concept and also towards showing how it affects the principles of restoration and the different areas in which the problem manifests itself (music, photography, films, videos, works which include light sources, engine, computing hardware and software, etc.).

Also, the creation of INCCA-f, the French-speaking branch of INCCA, has also established an important forum in which knowledge on these issues can be collated, thematic events can be held on specific items, and we hope that it will also lead to publications on these matters.

**R. L. And you, Marie-Hélène, what projects have you been most satisfied with?**

**M.H.B.** I find it hard to choose, there have been so many. In the Department of Restoration at ESBA, there is an ongoing research project, funded by the French Ministry of Culture, which studies all of the problems surrounding replacing or recreating. This whole approach demonstrates the impossibility of restoring the works we deal with, meaning that we have to recreate them, totally or partially. This is the research project, the work that ESBA is currently carrying out, and it is quite satisfying.

**R. L. I would like to know how a conservator-restorer is trained in France. Where can one study this discipline?**

**C.D.** Marie-Hélène is the person to answer this question, but I can tell you that there are four centres in France which train conservation-restoration professionals. The Institut Nationale du Patrimoine, the Université Paris 1, and also two art schools which have conservation-restoration departments: one in Avignon and another in Tours, where Marie-Hélène lectures.

**R. L. Yes, but that is for all areas of the conservation-restoration profession. What about specific training? How is someone specialising in contemporary art conservation trained?**

**M.H.B.** There is only one school which promotes a specialism in contemporary art, which is the one in Avignon. It has always offered a specialism in painting conservation, whereas in Tours, the specialism was in the conservation and restoration of sculpture. The idea was for each school to specialise in one type of art work. Now, the creation of other specialisms is being considered, but rather than focusing on artistic periods, these will be material-specific. So, there'll be one for painting, sculpture, photography, graphic art, etc. In France, the idea of doing the specialism on its own has not been accepted. Rather, the student has to attain a solid grounding in conservation and restoration first, and then move on to consider the issues facing contemporary art.

**C.D.** When you speak to students who graduate from these schools and who are now specialising in very specific technical areas, such as the proper functioning of engines, they all say – and I agree with them – that one must first of all achieve a classic academic education in which you learn about restoration from an academic perspective, and then specialise later. They don't believe in looking at contemporary art at the beginning. Later, you need to develop a critical perspective, which leads onto research, but before this you need to be trained in academic art. Of course, I fully support the creation of specialisms.

**M.H.B.** To add to that, at Tours there is a project for the introduction of a year's specialisation in contemporary art, which would be open to students who had a Master's degree in conservation-restoration, regardless of specialism. So, the specialisation in contemporary art would require an extra year's training. This specific course could also form part of a lifelong learning programme, as part of professional training. This is a project which requires careful thought and which is being more difficult to bring to fruition than I had hoped, and yet which has never been more relevant.

**C.D.** Also, in the two areas that I know best, it is also possible that, even if the students have studied conservation and restoration for a particular classic academic specialism, they may choose to focus on something contemporary for their course, even if they do not have any training in that area. However, the solid grounding they have received in traditional art conservation can be very useful, enabling them to hit upon some ingenious solutions to resolve the specific problems they may face with these contemporary art works.

**R. L. Moving on to more specific issues, do you normally work on real art works or are your concerns of a more theoretical nature?**

**M.H.B.** I do not work on real art works because I am not a conservator-restorer – I am an art historian – but, as part of my teaching duties, I work with the Master's level students and so I am concerned with reflecting on treatment proposals, diagnostic issues and the selection of a particular treatment. But, secondarily, through my relationship with conservation-restoration colleagues, I also offer a theoretical perspective which can help to narrow down the conservation options for each case.

**C.D.** I'm not a conservator-restorer either, but there are two areas of my work which are very closely related to restoration. The first of these is completely theoretical, concerning obsolescence and the links between art and technique, and so it is of completely theoretical nature. The second area consists of researching the various techniques found in contemporary art. For this, we normally work as part of a team. For example, for the study on neon lights, we undertake case studies on real art works. We've chosen fifteen real art works at different museums and we are documenting these.

**R. L. In this part of the interview, I would like to focus on some theoretical issues surrounding the conservation of contemporary art. Cécile, I'd like to ask you for your opinion on what conserving a contemporary art work means, although I know that this is a very complex question. How important is it to seek out the essential characteristics of art works in order to tackle their conservation, without being distracted by more anecdotal issues?**

**C.D.** First of all, from my point of view, if we want to carry out conservation, the issue of documentation has to be addressed. The most important thing is to produce technical documentation and, in fact, this has been the theme of the second meeting of INCCA-f. For example, in a museum, the documentation department creates historical, bibliographical, iconographic and administrative records. The truly technical records are created by the conservator-restorer or someone on the technical staff. These two types of records are not kept together. In most cases, the technical documentation of

the art work has either not been created or are not stored with the general records for that work.

**R. L. It would be a fundamental step: first, it is necessary to properly document the work if we want to conserve it for the future, and also we must bear in mind that we must not only record its material characteristics, but also the semantic features which are linked to the production processes...**

**C.D.** That's right, but with regard to the technical documentation, the problem is that you almost always have to create everything from scratch, either because traditionally this has not been carried out previously or because these records have been lost.

**M.H.B.** My thoughts are similar, but I'll express them in a different way. The work must be studied in terms of the materials – this is another way of saying the same thing. I also think that it is important for conservation that the work be visible. This would be conservation with a particular aim: to make the work part of the present. We're used to talking about the concept of the duty to conserve and restore a work of art for the future, but I say that we must also conserve and restore the work for today, not just the future – to do it for ourselves. By conserving the work of art, we bring it into the present. We make it visible and accessible, also through technical study and technical documentation.

**R. L. When we speak of the materials which make up a contemporary art work, specific and complex issues arise, concerning the passage of time and the effect of this on the art work. I would like to know what your opinion is on how we should approach the conservation of materials and how such an approach is linked to the conceptual questions of conservation. What role do materials play in current works of art?**

**M.H.B.** I have two different perspectives on training in the conservation and restoration of traditional art works. Above all, I am a spectator: I watch what my students do, I observe what my conservator-restorer colleagues teach... I take a more distant point of view, which involves observing and reflecting on what the conservator-restorers do.

I also have another perspective arising from my familiarity with the work of Claude Rutault, the artist who I have worked with a lot and continue to do so, and it so happens that, in his work, the material is not important. In this case, you can change the medium, it's possible to change the colour and, in any case, the work will only exist at the moment in which it is to be exhibited. For the work of this artist, the medium can be conserved, but in the end, if it has not been possible to conserve the material, this is not so serious. Therefore, I also have the experience of being acquainted with an art work which will always exist in time, but not

necessarily in a material state. Its material nature is very important, as it does truly exist when it is a painting hanging on a wall, but, at the same time, it will go through periods in which it does not consist of any material.

**R. L. These are especially important issues for the conservation of contemporary art, as situations of this kind occur frequently. You've given a really illustrative example, because this really explains how materials should be understood in a different way to those of academic art. In each case they take on a significance which must be studied on an individual basis...**

**C.D.** My work isn't concerned with materials. It's concerned with machines. Materials, from the physical or chemical point of view, are not part of my work. My work consists of determining how machines work and also the devices that form part of current works of art.

**R. L. But it is possible to change the materials of a technological work...**

**C.D.** Yes, but it is different, it is all a mechanism, and I work more on mechanisms than on materials, which is a very different approach. Also, this research area practically does not exist in conservation-restoration and we need to create it. For example, if you have a lamp that doesn't give out light and which forms part of the work as an object, without electricity – it's just glass and metal – then if it gets broken, you call the glass and metal conservator-restorer, so that he or she can restore the material and ensure that it retains the same form as far as possible. But if it is a lamp which should give off light, which is connected to electricity, then you have to restore the whole electrical mechanism and then it's not a glass and metal conservator-restorer who will do that, but someone who knows how an electrical light bulb works. That is a very different requirement and until now this issue has not been addressed in the conservation world.

**R. L. From your point of view, how do such substitutions affect the authenticity of art works? What, in your opinion, constitutes the authenticity of a contemporary art work? Does authenticity reside only in the original material shaped by the hand of the artist, when today we find works which are moving away from uniqueness, in which we see the replacement of parts of them, and we even see their re-issue?**

**C.D.** I'm going to answer by talking about the particular theme I work on, which is technical obsolescence, and for which there are basically two answers. The first answer is that the thing that always ensures that we know that the work has been understood, that we know

what it is, is accurate technical documentation. This is a key point to make.

Due to the changes in techniques, a work may consist of several types of materials. Consumables are one type of mechanism that you necessarily have to change, without there being any repercussions for this. For example, when a light bulb doesn't work, you have to change it. To do this, first of all you need the documentation concerning what the art work was at the beginning and then you have to understand that the consumable can be replaced, as it is an energetic resource of limited duration. Consumables are reproducible, multiple, industrial items, and in a work of art those items can be replaced. We must defend the idea of the unique art work, with the timeless ideas of authenticity and material nature, but also accept that there are parts that can be replaced without affecting the work's authenticity. But the problem is that, when the techniques involved are not obsolete, you can replace the part with something of an identical material nature, but the effect of technological obsolescence is that then you can't find the same thing. That is where the conflict begins and the questions start to arise.

**R. L. And you, Marie-Hélène, do you think that parts of art works can be replaced without their authenticity being affected?**

**M.H.B.** It really depends on the art work. Each person will come to a different concept of authenticity, and in fact, the idea of authenticity, in terms of cultural value, is also created by economics, by the art market, and it is linked to the need for the art work to be an original in order to maintain its value in the art market.

As part of the characteristics of the work, there will be a part of it linked to its material nature, or not, and this communicates something about the issue of authenticity. It could lie in the materials or it could go beyond the materials. At the same time, I don't agree at all with the idea of conceptual authenticity – I don't believe that the authenticity of an art work lies in its concept. Authenticity will reside, for the art work in question, in the knowledge present in the documentation, as this contributes to the knowledge concerning the work and its recognition.

**R. L. And what can we say about the limits to the role of the artist? About returning to work on a piece years later, being pressured to do so by various factors... We have seen that sometimes artists modify or adapt them, in accordance with pressures of different kinds, and so it may be necessary to defend the original work. The original exhaustive documentation would also have a key part to play in this situation. What do you think about the possibility of setting limits to the role of the artist?**

**M.H.B.** Well, I think that the art work belongs to the artist in the material sense, and he or she can decide

what to do about it up to the moment it enters the museum. From the moment it enters the museum, the work is no longer under the authority of the artist. It is true that there are certain artists who reject this authority...

**C.D.** Well, my answer to this is straightforward: this is the theme of the next event which will be held in Paris on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014. At the INCCA-f, we are organizing a conference on artists' intellectual property and a lawyer will be speaking at the event. We all know that artists have very important rights regarding intellectual property, but this doesn't mean that they can do anything. When the whole idea is a part of the artist's way of working, then this must be respected, but if an accident occurs or the artist wants to modify the work, then this must be considered, debated, proposals should be made... Really, it's such a difficult subject... We'll have to pay close attention at the conference.

**R. L. What is the role of the conservator-restorer of contemporary art at the current time? What have we become, given that art works will inevitably change with the passing of the years? How important is the original appearance of an art work?**

**C.D.** Well, in this sense it is very important also to conserve the different stages and changes which the work has undergone. Therefore, conserving the work also involves the history of the different stages it's gone through and stabilising it as much as possible, because everything changes in the end.

**M.H.B.** I think that, in part, contemporary art works are not really so contemporary now, because time has moved on and some of them first saw the light many years ago now. I think that the role of the conservator-restorer, together with that of other professionals, will involve the task of halting possible changes to the work and fixing it at one point, seeking out a state and determining a state or point of reference, deciding at what point we should stop, stating that from now on this is the state in which the work should be conserved. We might decide that the state of the work will be fixed at its current one: the work may have been created in 1960, for example, it's fixed at 2010, for example, and it's decided that from that moment on it becomes a historical work. In this way, a kind of reference image will have been determined. I think that the conservator-restorer has a very important role to play in the moment at which a decision is taken on the state in which the work is to be preserved for the future.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

We have just interviewed two important professionals working on the conservation of contemporary art in France. The conversation has dealt with interesting issues, such as authenticity and the search for the

essence of a work of art, and the passage of time and the modification of its original appearance. It is true that these subjects can be considered at greater length, but we have found their opinions on these issues particularly interesting and, with them, we have been able to make a contribution to a debate which today has become absolutely necessary.

Perhaps some other important questions have not been discussed, such as the role of the spectator in the process of understanding and enjoying contemporary art, and the study of the spectator's importance within the complex socio-cultural network surrounding the art of today. Another issue is, from the moment at which an art work becomes part of our consciousness, to what extent is change or modification permissible? These matters are the issue of current debate, going into ever greater depth, and their resolution will no doubt be complex. Yet such a resolution will be of great use to conservator-restorers involved in safeguarding the transmission of contemporary art for the future.

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Prof. Dr. ROSARIO LLAMAS PACHECO. Tenured Professor at the Department of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage at the Polytechnic University of Valencia. She has supervised several Ph.D. and Master's theses on conservation and restoration of contemporary art. She is a member of the University Institute for Heritage Restoration, and has published various books and papers on the conservation of contemporary art.

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