

The Living Objects.
Cross-cultural Conservation, Artifacts and Art History

Introduction

The conservation of objects in ethnographic and anthropology museums raises a number of specific issues discussed by conservators and curators since 2000. Indeed, the concept of “cross-cultural” conservation presupposes two important networks: a culture which owns and conserves objects – mostly European or Euro-American – and a second culture which produced the artifacts and no longer owns them. In this context conservation and restoration confront different types of knowledge, experiences and interpretations around a single object, whilst sometimes raising dilemmas.

This paper examines the conservation and restoration of objects in the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington DC and New York City. At the beginning of the 1990s, an American report on conservation methods pointed out that the elders of the First Nations claimed the agency of their artifacts, and asked the museum to preserve their life and power providing them with the necessary elements to their survival. The claims of Native Americans in the area of conservation is more loudly heard today due to a new direction taken in Western sciences and the contemporary art world, which questions specifically the life of objects¹. The aim of this presentation is to determine what this perspective can offer to conservation sciences as well as to art history. From a culturalist perspective, this research underlines that the power of objects depends on specific cultures. This paper also points out that the question of *agency* is linked to specific times or places - such as museums and storage rooms. I suggest that the power of an object is also related to practices - such as conservation and restoration - as well as to individuals – depending for instance on which conservators is treating the artifact. My point is that the degree of agency of an object varies during its life. Searching for a global approach to agency, I argue that the questions of the power and life of objects may be successfully addressed in terms of “activation”, giving a close look at the people, gestures or displays manipulating the artifacts². Thus, I point out that conservation and restoration are practices which increase or decrease the aliveness and power of objects.

¹ HEINICH, N., «Les objets-personnes : fétiches, reliques et œuvres d’art», *Sociologie de l’art*, n° 6, 1993, pp. 25-55 ; BONNOT, T., *La vie des objets*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2002 ; AMES, M., «What happens to the museums when their objects become a speaking subject?», *Harbour Magazine of Everyday Life*, 3, hiver 1993-1994, pp. 63-65.

² BARTHOLEYNS, G., et alii (dir.), *La Performance des images*, Bruxelles, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2010.

The National Museum of the American Indian (Washington, New York)

The National Museum of the American Indian is part of the Smithsonian Museums, and includes three sites: the main building in Washington DC, a second building in New York City and an annex called the Conservation Research Center in Suitland, Maryland. Please find here some views of the permanent exhibition in New York. The National Museum of the American Indian is not the only museum to conserve Native artifacts in New York. The American Museum of Natural History for instance, is an important concurrent.

If some of their displays may look similar, the main difference between these institutions remains underground and concerns the conservation and storage of the artifacts. Please note that I’m using here the word artifact in a broader sense to describe any object constructed by human beings, without discussing its artistic or sacred value. It is anyway clear that these artefacts were not made for being exhibited in a museum, and are not “ethnographical” by nature : “They did not begin their life as ethnographic objects. They became ethnographic through processes of detachment and contextualization”³. The National Museum of the American Indian wants to offer an alternative to regular ethnography museums, proposing - among other things - new forms of conservation practices and new rules on preservation issues. In this perspective, and before the opening of the museum in the 1990s, a report called “The Way of the People” had been commissioned from the Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates Firm – i.e. the firm founded by the famous postmodernist architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

This report is a substantial interview of Native Americans communities. Two parts of the report are particularly relevant to our interrogation today. The first is a long series of quotations, presenting Native voices, unfortunately without any clear discursive context; the second is a series of forms, fulfilled by Native delegates responding to specific questions about conservation issues. Many precise claims emerged from this documentation. The most important one, and probably the most surprising one according to western conservation standards, is the will to preserve the life of objects by giving them the opportunity to breath, eat, drink, move and exercise many other functions pertaining to life.

A member of the Lakota tribe described the storage condition in which he personally keeps the pipe of his grandfather with the following terms: “The pipe is kept in a frame building without environmental controls – I don’t call it a Museum... It is alive.”⁴ The privileged environment is without hygrometric control - in opposition to most museums and storage rooms - and is described as “alive”. In the same report, the feeding of the artifacts is

³ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, B., “Objects of Ethnography” in *Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, pp. 17-79 (and for this quotation, p. 3).

⁴ *The Way of the People*, Phase 2 Final Report, p. 20.

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required from Hopi people: “These materials should be treated only by us, and fed periodically by us”⁵.

These specific methods of conservation are encouraged by Native people according to the life and power attributed to the objects. In other words, these wishes are legitimated by arguing a specific definition of the artifacts: “The objects have power, have life”⁶. I think that this would be a good and simple definition of agency according to Gell. This special quality also implies certain conservation norms in the use of particular materials as well as in ways of storage. Plastic is prohibited not only because it would be exogenous or have a bad impact on natural materials, but also, because it potentially prevents the whole living object to breathe: “It is not the fact that the material actually breathes, but the fact that the spiritual content of it, the condition of it, has to breathe through some means of its own not to be hampered by plastic or being constrained by having it in a container”⁷. Similarly, certain artifacts cannot be stored in the same room because of the power they exert over others: “There are also certain artifacts that should not be mixed with those of another culture. The power and strength of one cultural item can be destroyed by the presence of that from another culture.”⁸

Thus, these Natives objects are alive, and require to breathe, to eat and to move. They also have power, which directly influences other objects and human beings. Indeed the curators of Western museums are often accused by Natives people of destroying their artifacts by preventing their use, while the conservators are anxious of the proliferation of insects and bacteria which may be consequential to the introduction of people, food and liquid in the storage rooms. In “the Way of the People”, Jamie Kolker, one of the consultants of Venturi and Brown’s Firm, described even a fundamental difference between the two cultures:

“Bottomless, there is a fundamental philosophical incompatibility between Western and Non-Western perception of material objects, their handling and care. The western obsession for the insurance of an object’s physical immortality, including its removal from the contamination of human association, is totally counter to the Native American orientation of «use it or loose it»”⁹.

This opposition between two cultures and two visions - one obsessed by the use of objects, and the other one fascinated by their preservation - is of course much too schematic. First, because not all the artifacts are supposed to be used by Native people, nor preserved by western curators. Secondly, because many individuals have different opinions on these questions, regardless of their cultures or origins. Following the results of this report, the

⁵ Hopi Tribal Museum, *The Way of the People*, Phase 2, 25 mai 1995.

⁶ Sandy Jones quoted in CLAVIR, M., *Preserving what is valued. Museums, Conservation and First Nations*, UBC Press, Vancouver, p. 205.

⁷ March 1992, Traditional Care consultation, Edmund J. Ladd, Zuni.

⁸ Melvin Larocque, *The Way of the People*, Phase 2, 25 mai 1995.

⁹ J. A . Kolker, *The Way of the People*, Wendy Jessup Report, Phase 2, Final Report.

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storage rooms of the NMAI are now more and more accessible to people, food, liquid or smoke, as well to dance and music performances.

Conservation as reception and requalification of objects

It becomes clear from this example that the conception of what conservation *is* – and basically if it *is* conservation *or not* - is directly related to an understanding of the object. The perception of the object orientates its manipulations and conservation treatments. In this sense, restoration and conservation are part of a reception process. The New Zealand conservator Rose Evans relates her choices of treatment directly with her approach to the artifact: “When I’m treating a carving, I’m not treating it as a piece of wood. So, that’s the first issue – that I’m treating an ancestor – so that’s quite a different thing.”¹⁰

However conservation is not only a form of reception: it also happens to be a form of recreation and requalification, with an active effect. In this perspective, restoration is part of a transformation process: almost killed in very cold storage rooms, or asphyxiated in boxes for some people - highly disinfected in anoxia boxes and respectfully conserved for others - the value and identity of the artifact change according to its various manipulations. Rosita Worl, a Tlingit anthropologist, underlines that the museum is transforming the exhibited things: “How could the NMAI overcome what has been described by others as our «ethnological fate», whereby our sacred objects are treated and exhibited as artifacts?”¹¹ Thus, restoration and conservation are specific forms of reception which relate to the singular definition of the object and also modify the curated objects, changing their life and power.

Let us now look at another example taken from a totally different context, exemplifying ways in which restoration and perception – in a philosophical and visual sense - are connected. In the mid-1990s, exactly when the report for the National Museum of American Indian was written, a discussion took place in the conservation studio in the Louvre. The ex-director of the Louvre, Pierre Rosenberg, was surprised by an unidentified shape in a painting of the French 17th Century Painter Eustache Le Sueur: the presence of a blue/gray form in the image couldn’t be clearly or evidently identified. The curator had to decide how to deal with it, and experts were called in to describe how they would like to see it. Finally, basing their decision on ancient prints, they decided that the shape would be a hat¹². As such, restoration activates a certain type of potential images – not only created in the spectator’s mind or perception, as Dario Gamboni has demonstrated¹³ – but actually changing the appearance and function of the thing. Depending on the way in which a painting is

¹⁰ Quoted in CLAVIR, M., *op. cit.*, p. 233.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹² Restauration compte-rendu visite au Petit-Bourbon, 14 juin 1991, Paris, dossier du C2RMF, Dossier général No. 4532.

¹³ GAMBONI, D., *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

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perceived, the restorators endow it with a specific interpretation, which becomes the object itself. Indeed, some paintings seem to be falsified, lost or “ruined”, according to the language generally used to describe an unsatisfactory intervention. When a restoration is perceived as unsuccessful, the painting may become a “fake” or even another painting. In this case all its original power is supposed to be lost after the intervention. But another kind of power can also emerge or increase. Then restoration may also “reveal” an artwork and increase its value as well as its prestige, as was stated by Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny in their study on the rediscovery of antic sculptures in the 18th century.

A similar conclusion can be stated for Native objects. An “ethnographical” artifact may become “dead”, “alive”, “fake” or “authentic” according to its manipulation and depending on the context¹⁴. Restoration and conservation recreate a potential object, attributing a particular identity, and giving a certain power, status or agency. At this point, and in the perspective of a global approach to agency, it may be interesting to address the same questions to other kinds of artifacts - as objects used in western performances, for instance. How do various objects loose or acquire agency? Once it has been activated by an artist, a conservator or a spectator, how long is the object active?

Agency and the lives of objects

Coming back to the question of *agency*, what can the case of Native American objects teach us? As I stated above, we may be skeptical of the complete meeting and of the strict opposition of two cultures – a Western conservation practice which engages with objects as passive and dead artifacts versus a Native one advocating their use and fully acknowledging their agency and life. If the cultural context is important, the example of the NMAI shows us that the agency of an object can also be taken into consideration by Western conservators and curators. The agency of the artifact is also taken into account by the Humanities, following the impulses given by the books of Alfred Gell, David Freedberg, Horst Bredekamp or Arjun Appadurai¹⁵. The contemporary art world has also embraced the idea of “living objects”. The question of a strict boundary between “subject” and “object” is raised, for instance, by the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia. In a slide show entitled *Open Your Eyes* (2010), Attia confronts African statues and photographs of soldiers mutilated during the First World War, developing elements of a politic and aesthetic of reparation. Soldiers are brutally mutilated and repaired as objects, they resemble the repaired artifacts while the sculptures seem to become alive in this confrontation.

¹⁴ For other exemples : ETIENNE, N., *La restauration des peintures à Paris, 1750-1815. Pratiques et discours sur la matérialité des œuvres d’art*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012, pp. 97-181.

¹⁵ GELL, A., *Art and Agency. An anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998; FREEDBERG, D., *The Power of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989; BREDEKAMP, H., *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010; VAN ECK, C., “Living Statues. Alfred Gell Art and Agency, Living Presence, Response and the Sublime”, *Art History*, September 2010, pp. 643-659.

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Thus, the agency of a specific object may depend on practices and material life rather than on ontological and definitive qualities. In the field of conservation, we can identify specific treatments and singular methods of curation, which may preserve the agency of the artifact – or destroy this capacity. I would like to point out a circular movement here: in one hand, the agency of an object depends on its reception and the manner in which it is perceived – amongst other things during its restoration. In the other hand, agency can be activated by practices, and notably by conservation practices. Agency depends on material transformations and uses of the artifact, providing it with various identities during its life. Therefore the question no longer is to acknowledge if an object has or hasn't agency, but rather to focus on the ways and practices which activate its power. I would suggest to displace the question from an ontological interrogation (“is agency a property of the artifact? - essential or accidental?”) – to a practical and anthropological interrogation (“how is agency instaurated? with which tools, practices and products?”). Thus, it may be relevant to connect the power of artifacts with gestures and thoughts underlying the interconnections between material and symbolic, psychological or economic dimensions of things. The question may no longer be to know if an object is a subject or reciprocally, but to determine which processes may instaurate new regimes - until forgetting completely the distinctions between object and subject, passive and active, as Daniel Miller already suggested.

All these considerations lead to a questioning of the life of objects and their modes of existence in specific times and places. As we have seen, conservation and restoration update the object and change its *modes d'existence* (*ways of existing*), according to the expression of Etienne Souriau – i.e. transforming a grandfather into a pipe or a pipe into a grandfather. In this sense, *restoration* may also be called *instauration*, following the word used by Souriau¹⁶. The objects - Native American artifacts as well as Western paintings – in this extent reveal themselves as perpetual works in progress, continually produced and reproduced by a process of transformation and various manipulations. The ancient metaphor - used in the 19th century, amongst others in the writings of John Ruskin - describing the existence of artifacts following an anthropomorphic schema, depicting their birth, life and death, may in that sense be reconsidered. The study of restoration invites to consider the life of an object as the sum of all states and all the transformations it endures. Focusing on the material existence of objects in time, this reflection addresses the artwork as a *continuum*, i.e. a material object undergoing perpetual transformations. This focus on continuous modification bridges the distinction between creation and reception of artworks, while acknowledging the constant refashioning of these objects, and the manner in which material transformation impacts their life and power¹⁷.

¹⁶ SOURIAU E., *Les différents modes d'existence*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1943; LATOUR B., “Reflections on Etienne Souriau's Les Modes d'existence”, in *The Speculative Turn* (edited by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek) 2011, pp. 304-333.

¹⁷ APPADURAI A. (dir.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, New York, 1988.