Values and Valuation of Modern and Contemporary Visual Art.

The Role of Reflective Practice – Collection of The Museum of Art in Łódź 1931 – 2018

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The thesis starts with a chapter called “Values of artwork in cultural heritage system.” In this chapter, several important questions which lead to the main topic of the thesis and relevant definitions of relevant technical terms are given. The two main questions are: What is Cultural Heritage? What is value in heritage? The answers are given through the lens of conservation but also by using the tools of historians of art and by demonstrating the hypothesis in particular in the contemporary art. To be able to compare the contemporary perception with earlier ways of estimating a value system, a profound description of the development of value systems in conservation is given. This ranges from the 16th to the 19th century and is followed by the chapter “Contemporary goals of valuation and ethics of conservation-restoration” providing a diverse picture of goals and values in codes of ethics and international doctrine and networks in heritage conservation.

The following chapter addresses the question: “What do we learn from artists?” To answer it, the collection of the “a.r.” group and the significance of the museum of art in Łódź in the period 1931 – 2018 is chosen. After an introduction to the “a.r.” collection and the development of the Museum of Art in Łódź the next step was to explore the role of artists over time. This reflects the political development and the ideas of the artists themselves. But also the values which are present due to the particular place and the mission to educate the society are described.
The third chapter provides “A synoptic view of the issue of the valuation of modern art with reference to the collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź”. In this chapter a number of art works and their background are described, for example: Joseph Beuys and his “Polentransport 1981”, Ryszard Waśko and “Construction in Process”. Deep understanding of the individual artist’s background and intentions support better comprehension of the museum and its intention. However, works by Tadeusz Kantor are particularly challenging for a conservator.

The 4th chapter deals with evaluation of individual works of art - conservation / restoration / reconstruction. There are numerous objects from the collection which were treated and preserved or partly recreated in the framework of the academic training of conservators at the University of Fine Arts in Warsaw. For example the reconstruction of „Burdygiel” of Tadeusz Kantor, which is dealt with in a very comprehensive manner in this chapter.

Another work is Alina Szapocznikow’s sculpture “The Journey” which is chosen as an example of the retrieval of the values of the work of the artist during conservation. The third case study was Władysław Strzemiński’s Neoplastic Room.

The last chapter is dedicated to “Contemporary conservation as a reflective practice” in which the candidate takes “a critical observation of museum activities in the light of reflective practice in the field of the heritage of the collection of modern art in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź”. The method is based on an observation by John Dewey in his book intended for teachers (How We Think (1910, 1933), followed by the discussion of methods suggested by Donald A. Schön in The Reflective Practitioner. More authors follow, all in the area of reflective theory. Then the candidate examines the contemporary tasks of reflexive practice giving as examples the Getty Conservation Center and the work done by University of Fine Arts Warsaw in the field of conservation of contemporary art and highlights how the conservator came to be an advocate of internal values of a work of art. The candidate explains what is needed for reaching a balanced strategy for the protection of cultural heritage.

In the chapter “Responsibility for what remains for future generations?” the candidate lists our recent focus in life and our recent problems and invites us to understand that each and every generation sees and interprets past according to recent life. “Each generation changes
its heritage in accordance with current needs.” The present era of individualism and egoism, material-focusedness is opposed to continuity as a value described by Gadamer.

“According to hermeneutics, it is precisely in the field of art, community and participation in tradition that the most basic dimensions of human and aesthetic experience are manifested.” With Jan Assman the terms “cultural memory”, “communicative memory” and “social memory” are discussed.

In the chapter “The practice turn in contemporary theory” the importance of the concept of “practice” in today’s theoretical discourse in contrast to theoretical focussed past concept is illustrated.

Under the title “The need for and development of a reflective society” the European cultural routes are described as a valuable tool for understanding of a common culture, history, memory and European integration. “These paths must also correspond to some of the fundamental values promoted by the Council of EU, such as democracy, human rights and intercultural exchange in cultural tourism and are not necessarily physical. And further awareness rising tools of the EU are introduced and connected with philosophers’ ideas.

Then the recent generation and their life in the present moment is made a topic in conservation and, respectively, a possible solution to prevent losing this generation to uneducation is brought forward.

Finally the “Reflexive practice in the Museum of Art in Łódź” is presented, which seems to be an exceptionally well developed best practice example showing a form of conscious communication between generations.

The fact that the collection was created due to the lack of selfimportance of the artists is a value in itself, which is immaterial, but particularly important for this collection and its place in Poland behind the “iron curtain”. The role of the three first directors, each one a strong personality, is highlighted.

The candidate was able to show how the understanding of cultural heritage has broadened over time and how at the same time the idea of what made a particular piece into a work of art always had been a core element. Furthermore, she demonstrated well how the different
values must be weighed against each other in a conservation process and where the
difficulties lie in this process, in particular, when we consider what is called intangible and
digital heritage today. The candidate describes the need for a comprehensive understanding
of the work of art before any conservation treatment.

In her analysis of the contemporary art collection of „a.r.” group and the significance of the
museum of art in Łódź in the period 1931 – 2018 the candidate finds interesting new values.
one example of such values is the „brand value”. This value has existed since centuries,
however no one has described it as such in the context of conservation so far. The parallels
with the history of MoMa in New York are illustrated and also the important role the
museum and the collection have played and are still playing for the society. However the
most important element seems to be the vital co-operation with the artists. This way the
museum is unique in Poland and beyond and leads a lively communication between
presence and past. The example seems to be very well chosen and is described in a lively
manner.

Another valuable aspect of the thesis is demonstrating the history of artistic preservation of
the collection at the Museum of Art in Łódź and the discovery of how the values of these
collections influenced the changing views about the duties of the conservator and the
curator. Furthermore, the candidate takes up our recent way of thinking and relates it to the
process of conservation which helps us understand better what conservation is or should
be. She highlights the present specific cultural context and social and political situation of
conservation. The candidate describes well how important the individual personalities of
both artists and collection managers were to create a museum of the sort it is now. As well
as conservation, this is also true of any human activity. It is, however, a different factor to
which attention is drawn correctly and which was has not been mentioned so far in the
conservation literature. Very interesting is also the aspect of documentation which is
created by the artists talking about their works in public, which is actually also a
contribution to conservation of a work of art in collective memory. The work “Construction
in Process” by Ryszard Waśko is chosen to highlight the close interweaving of art and
political developments and how it might lead to founding new museums to protect and
keep art, which actually raises new questions concerning art itself in conjunction with the
political situation would allow placing a work of art back into proper context. It is touching
to read how the co-operation between Polish and Western artists worked, supported by their deep mutual trust. Numerous avant-garde artists were brought this way beyond the iron curtain. Other difficulties were also overcome by means of good human spirit and good will. A publication was brought together by asking the individual artists to deliver their own documentation of their art and these pieces were brought together into a sort of a catalogue. All this lives in the work of art now and is part of it.

The works by Tadeusz Kantor, Alina Szapocznikow’s and Władysław Strzemiński allow for a deep and highly needed discussion in the field of conservation. The candidate very properly points out: “Despite the various problems they raise and conservation and curatorial procedures adopted, in the case of the three works from the collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź discussed here, a common feature in the restoration of their cultural values is respect for artists’ intentions.” A very interesting suggestion is to use the conservation and the discussion which comes along with it as a tool for improving the public understanding of art.

One strong point in the argumentation is seeing a work of art as a guarantee of order and, therefore, as a guidance for humans. “A work that is created in modern times would draws from tradition and thus evokes and updates the chain of tradition. This experience introduces curiosity, and consequently optimism, in the expectation of what art will be in the future. In the experiencing of art, Gadamer recognized the essential form of human experience and understanding of the world. This translates in a broad context into the model of a human encounter within the framework of history, tradition and culture, in its wider sense,” writes the candidate. These arguments represent an advanced and valuable contribution to better understanding of conservation as a profession and of today’s society. Another aspect worth discussion is the importance of practice and human experience. It recently seems to have become the basis for creating a common language and observation in most fields of interest. The candidate concludes that “this approach contains the potential to strengthen the position of cultural values. It emphasizes the fact that it is man who creates meaning and values and is responsible for the truth.” The candidate performed several projects during her research work, including one which assigned a special role to artists and their position in society in order to restore the rank of
their profession, essential for the ethos of the intelligentsia. It is suggested that, although this is actually also part of the restorers’ work, it has brought unexpected results which are worth being examined.

Finally the choice of the museum is excellent in terms of enabling the reader to understand what the candidate wants to show. She does not refrain from critical statements concerning the current situation in Łódź: politicians of today are inclined to use the field of culture for political marketing or understand only its through the economic aspect – as a tourist attraction. Recently the conservation studio in the museum was renovated, which again is a sign of recognition of the status afforded to conservation in this museum.

The candidate gives numerous other background information on the perception and history of the museum, the value it is attributed and the awards it wins. However she also has a wider view, such as towards activities of the European Union representatives and the programmes fostering the preservation and understanding of cultural heritage, bringing together a consistent list of relevant literature.

In conclusion of my comments, I present a positive opinion of Joanna Kiliszek doctoral dissertation. As a reviewer, I think that it represents a high level, which authorizes me to allow public exam of the doctoral thesis.

Patricia Engel January 2019