

Abstract

Public art can give rise to a variety of problems concerning their conservation depending on whether the object is located outdoors or indoors. With outdoor public art, which is usually made of long-lasting materials such as stone or bronze, the challenges are often environmental. When it comes to public art placed indoors, the conservator also has to face the challenge of many more materials.

Furthermore, all public art can lead to conservation problems of an ethical character, for instance those of identity and authenticity. Conservation can also have legal implications if it is contrary to the artist's intention or the work of art has to be moved or changed.

Starting with actual examples of conservation, this paper presents a discussion on the different measures taken, including the involvement of the artist in the decision-making process, offers advice on how to handle conflicts and for the long-term maintenance of public art.

Résumé

L'art public peut soulever une diversité de problèmes liés à sa conservation, en fonction de l'exposition de ces objets qui peut se faire à l'intérieur ou à l'extérieur. Concernant les objets d'art public exposés à l'extérieur et qui sont en matériaux faits pour durer longtemps comme la pierre ou le bronze, les défis se situent souvent au niveau de l'environnement. Quand il s'agit d'objets d'art public exposés à l'intérieur, le défi pour le conservateur est aussi de faire face à beaucoup plus de matériaux.

Pour aller plus loin, tous les objets d'art public peuvent soulever des problèmes de conservation, à caractère éthique, par exemple celui de l'identité et de l'authenticité. La conservation peut également avoir des implications légales si cela est contraire à la volonté de l'artiste ou si l'oeuvre d'art doit être bougée ou déplacée.

En commençant par les exemples actuels de conservation, l'article présente le débat sur les différentes mesures prises, incluant aussi le rôle de l'artiste dans le processus de prise de décision, et donne des conseils sur la manière de gérer les conflits et sur l'entretien à long terme des objets d'art public.

Conservation of art in public places

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Keywords

collection, conflict, conservation, contemporary, ethics, legislation, maintenance, public art

Introduction

Public works of art may be located outdoors, indoors, on a wall, be free-standing, movable or immovable. They may be made of stone, bronze or other materials, which are resistant to harsh, unstable or corrosive environments or human use. However, they may also be made of non-durable materials, materials used in unexpected ways, mixed untraditionally or used in a new context, any of which can present a real challenge for conservators.

Irrespective of how the works of art were made or of which material, the measures taken to preserve them depend on the owner, the size of the collection and whether there is an interest to preserve them and whether there are established strategies to do so. In the case that the public works of art that are to be preserved are contemporary, additional questions arise concerning legal aspects, ethics and values. The artist may be alive and willing to discuss material, techniques, procedures or ethics. However, conservation can sometimes lead to legal implications or conflicts between different parties.

An essential question is how the preservation of public art can be integrated as part of the concerns of the community, and how to alert those in charge to the fact that today's modern art will be tomorrow's cultural heritage.

Aspects of a large collection

Public art is, by definition, owned by the public since it is bought with tax money. The purpose of public art is to educate, stimulate and enlighten the mind of the public or to beautify a public space. These objectives are different from those that may exist for museum collections.

Public art often exists as anonymous collections or in conjunction with government or community activities. Those in charge also have other responsibilities, and most civil servants have neither the knowledge nor the interest in the management or preservation of art collections.

Art collections sometimes come into public awareness, for instance when works of art age or deteriorate. This means that they will consequently need more preservation and care, which will cost more. They can also come into focus when the managing organizations undergo a reorganization. This is what happened to the large collection owned by *Region Skåne*, the County Council in the southernmost region of Sweden.

Background

In Sweden, the County Councils play an important role in cultural life. In every one of the 24 regions of Sweden, the councils distribute government grants and take an active part in museum life by employing museum teachers, pedagogues and artists. They support theatres, dancing schools and artistic groups, and buy public art. County Councils form a network in cultural heritage between regional cultural institutions and between the government and the communities. Politicians, who are usually not experts in culture, give directives to the County Councils, but culture is just a minor part of their

Synopsis

El arte público puede originar muchos problemas en cuanto a su conservación, dependiendo de si el objeto se encuentra en interior o en exterior. En el arte público exterior, que a menudo se compone de materiales duraderos como piedra o bronce, los retos son a menudo ambientales. En cuanto al arte público interior, el conservador también tiene que enfrentarse al reto de muchos otros materiales.

Además, todo el arte público puede acarrear problemas de conservación de carácter ético, por ejemplo, de identidad y autenticidad. La conservación también puede tener consecuencias legales si es contraria a la intención del artista o la obra de arte tiene que trasladarse o cambiarse.

Comenzando con ejemplos reales de conservación, este documento presenta un debate sobre las diversas medidas adoptadas, incluyendo la implicación del artista en el proceso de toma de decisiones, y ofrece asesoramiento para manejar conflictos y sobre el mantenimiento a largo plazo del arte público.



Figure 1. Does bad location violate the artistic intention? (Photograph taken by Karin Hermerén)



Figure 2. Public art at risk (Photograph taken by Karin Hermerén)

responsibilities, which also include the areas of public transport, infrastructure and health care.

In the region of Skåne the County Council owns a large collection of art and continues to buy new art, which is to be placed both inside buildings and outdoors. Today the collection consists of about 30,000 works of art. They are to be found in all kinds of public places and buildings of different sizes and activities, mostly health care centres and hospitals belonging to the County Council. Those located outdoors are very few.

Only two people, one working full-time and the other part-time, are in charge of the management of this collection, and there is nobody to supervise or plan for its long-term preservation. As already stated, the works of art are bought with tax money. They can also be bought with the legally stipulated percentage of the construction cost of public buildings. A law passed in 1937 states that when the government constructs or renovates a building, 1% of the building costs are to be spent on art. It is the owner, the County Council, that is responsible for the collection.

A survey and its results

In 2001 I was asked by the County Council of Skåne to make a preservation plan for their collection of indoor art, approximately 30,000 items. There had been discussions concerning whether to deposit the whole collection either in a museum or in the management of a private party, or to sell it. The County Council wanted to know the status of the collection and the estimated cost of keeping and maintaining it. I had 100 hours at my disposal to check the status of the 30,000 works of art in 1271 public institutions situated in 76 towns and villages.

I started by reading the register lists to get to know the collection, i.e. to see what kind of works of art were made of what material and where and how they were placed. I looked into the history and organization of the collection and its management, interviewed the staff about their responsibilities and about the policies, routines, economy, storage and handling conditions and database of the County Council, etc. From these results I chose eight places or buildings, which I considered representative, for a more thorough inventory. I made reports of the condition and what kind of deterioration I saw and its possible causes, including the influence of unstable material, ageing, climate, environment, and the handling or location of the works of art.

Most of the works of art (70%) were on paper and most were prints. The second largest group (16%) consisted of paintings. The remaining 14% included textiles, photographs, and objects of metal, wood or glass.

The main results of my survey suggested that for the works of art on paper, the largest group, the physical damage was not significant. Instead they needed acid-free mounting and new frames. But 60% of the paintings showed one or more kinds of deterioration, which were mostly caused by handling or by being placed unsuitably (Figures 1–4).

In the report, I could also conclude that the climatic conditions were good and that there was no difference in deterioration between the works of art placed in small or in large localities of the buildings investigated. However, the commitment of the staff was important in the prevention of deterioration. In addition, I suggested changes in routines, which were later followed, for instance new policies, agreements between the County Council and the receiving institution and in-house education of the staff.

Some of the works of art that I saw during my investigations had been damaged because of material deterioration, which had changed their original appearance. Others had deteriorated because their environment, the place for which they had been created, had changed or because they were placed under, behind or partially hidden by another object.

Both cases could be considered from ethical and legal points of view.



Figure 3. Public art at risk
(Photograph taken by Karin Hermerén)



Figure 4. Public art at risk
(Photograph taken by Karin Hermerén)



Figure 5. Detail of bulging acrylic paint,
photograph taken during conservation
(Photograph taken by Jenni Lindbom.
Artist: David Svensson)

Ethical aspects

One work of art that I saw was made of acrylic paint, where the paint had been spread out and allowed to dry as long bands. The artist had afterwards woven these bands together into a web, to create a painting without support. However, the web could not support its own weight and had started to bulge at the base, and some of the bands looked as if they were going to break (Figure 5). The curious fingers of visitors had accelerated the deterioration of the web.

The work of art was removed from its place, but before treatment could begin some reflections were made (cf. Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art 1999: 164–168):

- When a contemporary work of art is conserved, ethical aspects concerning intervention, material and method may differ from the conservation of an older work. Conservation of an older work usually means that its representation (of the motif) is preserved regardless of the materials used for preservation. For a contemporary work of art, as the one just mentioned, the material (i.e. the acrylic paint) can be of importance for its meaning. Consequently anything other than acrylic, even though similar in texture, color and final shape, is unacceptable because it cannot preserve the meaning of the work. However, it is important that any intervention preserves both the meaning and the representation of the work of art.
- The work of art had started to bulge and break because neither the material nor the method of work that had been used were long-lasting. In contemporary art, both materials and working methods carry their own significant meaning, specific to the particular artist. The less traditional the material used is, the more it contributes to the meaning of the work. Therefore, the importance of the material and working process has to be determined prior to any kind of intervention.
- Preserving a work of art can involve choosing between different values, such as the original traces of the artist's hand or the conceptual meaning of a material and its treatment. This brings up questions concerning identity and intention. If identity is associated with the material, it would be easy to replace part of it as long as the same kind of material is used. If identity is created by the artist's hand, a minimum of intervention or even "doing nothing" may be an option. If identity is provided by the artist's intention, any conservation treatment could be used as long as the artistic intention is followed (if it is possible to define it).
- Various decision-making models have been developed, as the one developed by a working group of the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art (1999). These models were constructed in order to be helpful in the decision-making process for the conservation of contemporary art. Careful consideration is given to material and immaterial data, different values, the artist's opinions and the consequences and risks of any treatment for the meaning of the work of art.

With this in mind, the artist was invited to answer questions about the materials and techniques he had used, his reasons for choosing them, his opinions on conservation treatments (materials and methods), when he considered a change to be deterioration, his opinions on the meaning and representation of his work (the material and working methods), and considerations on authenticity, functionality and aesthetic values.

The artist's opinion on how conservation should be done and when, with what and how it should look, what is important and what is not, was taken into account when the conservation of the paintings took place, and is now registered for the future, together with the artist's opinions on long-term preservation.

Legal aspects

Usually restoration is undertaken to maintain the integrity of the work of art as it was initially created (Dreier 1995). However, contemporary art poses

new problems. Its physical identity could easily change either because of the materials used, as in the above-mentioned paintings, or because it was designed to exist for a limited period of time. The immaterial identity of it may change due to the changing context in which we regard it.

Conserving contemporary art could mean renovating, replacing or remaking parts of it. But is the artist's intention followed in such processes? Deterioration or change in appearance was perhaps part of the artist's original idea but equally well may not have been so. Is it the form, material, idea or other things that matter when the conservator tries to preserve a work of art?

To do the wrong thing could mean to violate the artistic intention, protected by law through the integrity right or *droit d'auteur*. The law is based on the assumption that the personality of the artist is reflected in his work of art and that the originator therefore should be protected against material and immaterial exploitation, name attribution and integrity, the latter being of concern for restoration.

The law is very clear, stating that a work of art must not be changed so that the artist's good name or individuality is violated. But how do we define the word "violate"? Is bad placement (behind a door, behind a plant or above a copying machine) violation (Figure 1)? If the risk of damage due to this placement is obvious, is that also violation (Figures 2–4)?

What if the physical environment of the work of art changes, from the particular environment it was made for? Examples of such changes and their effects can be many. Repainting a surrounding wall in another color than the original can make the work of art be perceived and interpreted differently. Shutting off the water of a fountain because visitors complain about getting wet obviously changes the artist's intention. Destruction of a work of art may be the result of new activities, as was the case for a mosaic in an entry hall during rebuilding.

In an example from my hometown, Helsingborg in southern Sweden, an artist was commissioned to make a sculpture for a school, just outside the gym (Figure 6). The artist, who was inspired by sneakers thrown onto the ground, made the sculpture in the form of several segments. Within a year of installing the sculpture, the school was closed and used for other purposes. The artistic idea and intention of the work of art was thus violated. In addition, there were other kinds of violation. The school yard was now empty and used as a playground by teenagers who drove cars into the different segments of the sculpture, used them as skateboard ramps and also set fire to some of them (Figures 7–8). Only three of the pieces remained after two years, and it was decided, together with the artist, to move them to a safer place. Swedish law does not protect the artist against the destruction of his or her work of art, only against the violation of changing it. However, this law is not very often tested. Usually violation is either not noticed or amicably settled, as in this example.

Conflicts: use and conservation

The relationship between use and conservation implies some kind of conflict. Conservation is guided by some (or someone's) interests, while use is guided partly by others. For example, the works of art in a museum are protected against the aggressive effects of daylight, although the public may complain about the poor light. In terms of use there are certain values that the user/purchaser wants to promote or achieve, such as knowledge of the artist or being able to view the paintings of an exhibition properly. This may come into conflict with conservation, which may require even less light for the sake of preserving the material. The conflict between presentation and preservation is well known. The conservation process may clash with the intentions of the artist as well as with the views of the owners or other users. Some users may even want to destroy the work of art, if it is considered to be in conflict with the environment.

Different people have different values, and those values influence the principles that affect how and what we would like to preserve.



Figure 6. The sculpture made for a school in Sweden (Photograph taken by Jenni Lindbom. Artist: Axel Lieber)



Figure 7. A (stolen) car has crashed into one of the segments of the sculpture (Photograph taken by Jenni Lindbom. Artist: Axel Lieber)



Figure 8. Another segment of the sculpture has been set on fire (Photograph taken by Jenni Lindbom. Artist: Axel Lieber)

To reduce disagreements, it is important to have as much information as possible about the work of art, the artist, the techniques and materials used, and knowledge of which values are to be prioritized, who makes the decisions and who the stakeholders are. Sorting and defining questions will help to highlight contradictions, to improve future practical conservation and long-term maintenance of works of art and can also be part of a maintenance plan for the management of collections of public art.

Result: long-term maintenance of public art in public places

Taking care of works of art placed in public places demands long-term maintenance and consistency in preservation routines. It is necessary to have a strategy with well-defined needs, including which treatments should be given priority, organising the personnel who are to take care of the operational work, and a plan for unforeseen damage and long-term preservation. More unconventional methods could be used, and have been tested in Sweden with good results, such as encouraging the public to “adopt” a public work of art and take responsibility for its wellbeing, report graffiti and damage.

The first part of any maintenance plan will have to identify future needs, prioritize them and define what actions should be taken. The second part will identify who is affected by the actions taken, whether there could be a clash of interests between different parties, which party has which responsibilities or rights, and how they could cooperate. The third part will implement long-term strategic maintenance and means of funding.

The County Council has, as a first step towards a long-term maintenance plan, set up a survey of the collection, its status and needs, and made a prioritized plan with options of actions to be taken and aspects to be considered. These include new routines, policies, agreements, safety or emergency plans, reduction of risks, in-house education, ethical and legal aspects, public relations, etc., as suggested in the report. One additional person has been employed, who has started to form a network around the public art and train the staff working with it and those who receive it. A conservator was initially made an active part of the decision-making process for purchases. The conservator should be consulted in order to have an influence on the choice of materials and to ensure that the works of art are placed where they will not be damaged or cause accidents.

A rough estimate of both the present and future cost of preservation was presented in the report, and immediately after it was presented funds were raised for conservation. However, new civil servants and politicians took charge and other financial priorities were made. The implementation of long-term strategic maintenance tends to be difficult, even when occasional efforts for preservation and conservation are made. An evaluation of all the efforts made and experience gained so far will be made in 2008, five years after the implementation of the results of the report. It is hoped that this may help the strategic management and change its focus towards funding long-term preservation.

Final remarks

Contemporary art is placed where the general public has more or less free access to it. Public places belong to everyone and to no one, as does any work of art placed in it. The public use of art may prove to be a problem when it comes to maintenance and long-term preservation, but it can be an advantage if the public is engaged.

Public places are contemporary. Time and environment change them gradually. If the surroundings of a work of art, made for a particular place, change dramatically, the question may be raised as to whether it is correct to preserve the work of art in that place or if a better way of maintaining it would be to move it. To change the artist's intention could have legal implications.

With large collections, it is important to have continuity and consistency in preservation and management. This will undoubtedly save money and effort in the future.

Conclusion

Irrespective of whether public art is placed outdoors or indoors, the challenges for the conservator may become a complicated matter. It is necessary for the conservator to take different options of preservation into account, from doing nothing to making a complete restoration, as well as the different implications these options may have. It is also important to increase our knowledge about what should be preserved and how, preferably together with the artist as well as with the owner and people physically close to the work of art. For long-term maintenance this is of the utmost importance.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the County Council and its staff for their openness when I was carrying out my survey and for permitting me to use my results and conclusions in this article. I would also like to thank my colleague Jenni Lindbom for providing me with the example of a public sculpture in Helsingborg, Sweden.

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