

**Alberto Argenton (2010), Convergences between conservation, restoration and psychology of art, in P. Iazurlo, F. Valentini (eds.) *Conservation of contemporary art: Themes and issues. A didactic experience*, Il Prato, Padova, pp. 31-40.**

### ***Introduction***

The following text means to supply some general guidelines with regard to the theoretical and methodological bases that cannot, in my opinion, be disregarded if one wishes to tackle, with due sensitivity, scruple and rigour, the practice of the conservation and restoration of art, be it contemporary or of any other period. These theoretical and methodological bases I deem myself able to contribute to, as a psychologist of art, as they are founded on specific and essential conceptual nuclei, analogous to those which guided psychological research in the field of art, permitting the achievement of numerous results of relevance.

Essentially, my intent is that of demonstrating – in a schematic and rather simplified form, given the limited space allowed by the editor – the existence of impregnating convergences of conceptual and methodological nature among some of the basic aspects of the theory and practice of conservation and restoration<sup>1</sup> and those pertinent to the line of research that was and continues to be engaged in studying the interaction existing between the functioning of perception and of cognition and artistic representation<sup>2</sup> and which presides over a broader and more general field of study of the psychology of art<sup>3</sup>.

In the pages to follow, I will therefore not discuss applicative problems – excepting a passing mention in the last paragraph – or specific, concrete cases, but will instead deal with some primary structural and processual variables concerning, generally, the perception of artistic works, understood as ‘*phenomenal*’ objects, as objects constituting “a presence in the human consciousness”<sup>4</sup>, and which represent particular manifestations of the artistic phenomenon considered in its entirety.

### ***The artistic phenomenon***

One convergence between Brandi's theory and that of psychology of art consists in their identical way of understanding both the essence and the coming to pass of the artistic phenomenon.

In his *Teoria del restauro*, Brandi<sup>5</sup> demonstrates how an adequate and correctly executed restoration – including the “preventive” kind and, hence, conservative – can only be founded on the peculiar character of the work of art. This peculiarity resides namely in the psychological process it induces in whom considers it: “the

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<sup>1</sup> I am essentially referring to the work undertaken in this field by Cesare Brandi and to that of those who followed and developed along these general lines.

<sup>2</sup> A line of research of a mostly Gestalt timbre, of which the most prominent role belongs to Rudolf Arnheim.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of this sector of study, see A. Argenton, *Arte e cognizione. Introduzione alla psicologia dell'arte*, Milan 1996. For a detailed analysis of the theoretical and methodological convergences between restoration and psychology of art, see A. Argenton, G. Basile, Restoration and the psychology of art: an occasion to test out Cesare Brandi's “Theory of Restoration”, in G. Basile (ed.), *Restoration of Scrovegni Chapel. Surveys, project, results*, Milan 2003, pp. 272-286.

<sup>4</sup> C. Brandi, *Il restauro. Teoria e pratica 1939-1986*, Rome 1994, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> C. Brandi, *Teoria del restauro*, Turin 1977.

special product of human activity to which is bestowed the name of work of art is such due to a singular recognition which occurs in the consciousness". Again, shortly afterwards: "any behaviour with regard to a work of art [...] depends on the occurrence of a recognition, or lack thereof, of the work of art as a work of art".<sup>6</sup>

In these few lines, in which Brandi enunciates the axiom upon which his theory of restoration is based, are delineated the fundamental processes which characterise the occurrence of that which, from a psychological point of view, is defined as the artistic phenomenon and in these he also refers to how the behaviour of the restorer may be considered, also from the same point of view, to be a particular type of aesthetic behaviour.

More recent psychological theory demonstrates how the construct of art is founded conceptually and, in reality, how the artistic phenomenon occurs and exists as a phenomenal experience liable to investigation, due to the interaction between three compulsory variables – the artist, the oeuvre and the *fruitore* (the one enjoying the oeuvre) – of which the relationships – artist/oeuvre and oeuvre/*fruitore* – give rise to two types of behaviour, respectively, normally called "artistic behaviour" and "aesthetic behaviour". The artistic behaviour constitutes all the cognitive and executive processes<sup>7</sup> which lead the artist to the conception and realisation of the oeuvre, while the aesthetic behaviour constitutes all the cognitive and executive processes which lead the *fruitore* to the reception and understanding of the oeuvre, sanctioning its artistry<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the phenomenon takes place when, and only when, the artistic properties of a product are recognised and attributed to it by a third party; this means that the phenomenon takes place any time a product of human activity provokes aesthetic behaviour.

Now, if we compare the theoretical model, briefly outlined above, with the contents of Brandi's theory and if we place the terms used by him, from a humanistic-philosophic perspective, next to their counterparts from the psychological field, we can find precise points of concord with regard to what should be understood to be art or, referring to his concrete examples, what should be understood as a work of art.

Once it is agreed that art consists in "a product of human spirituality"<sup>9</sup> or, as it is assumed in psychology, in the "ability of perceptual objects [...] to represent [...] relevant aspects of the dynamics of human experience"<sup>10</sup>, we can identify the peculiar character of the work of art in the cognitive processes it activates and that was defined, as a whole, by Brandi as "a singular recognition which occurs in the consciousness". This is a recognition which the consciousness makes with respect to an object generically classifiable among the products of human activity, yet distinguishing it to be a work of art and thus setting it apart "in a definitive way from fellowship with other products"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> With the term cognitive processes, we refer to cognitive activity in its entirety, that is to say, to the motivational, intellectual and emotional processes which, interacting with each other, characterise the mental functioning of the human being; with executive processes, we refer to executive activity, that is to say that set of processes, movements and actions which manifest at the sensory-motor level, which are coordinated cognitively and which concern all human operation, finding specification in relation to the executive field in which the activity takes place. See Argenton, *cit.*, 1996 on the subject.

<sup>8</sup> Argenton, *cit.*, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> R. Arnheim, *The power of the center*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1982, p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 4.

From this recognition, from this “understanding of the form of the work of art”<sup>12</sup> is aesthetic behaviour generated, to whatever end it may be directed, to whatever result it may lead or whatever effect it may produce, as claims also Brandi in his previously referred to corollary: “any behaviour with regard to a work of art [...] depends on the occurrence of a recognition, or lack thereof, of the work of art as a work of art”. A conservative and restorative intervention is therefore a particular kind of aesthetic behaviour, with all the characteristics of delicacy, complexity and responsibility it entails.

This said, let us now see how restoration, one with its premises and conditions in the act of recognition, is formed: “As a product of human activity, the work of art presents, in fact, a two-fold instance: the aesthetic instance, which corresponds to the basic fact of the artistry for which the work is a work of art, the historical instance, which it lays claim on as a human product realised at a certain time and place and which is located at a certain time and place. [...] Leading restoration back into direct rapport with the recognition of a work of art as such, now permits a definition: *restoration constitutes the methodological moment of the recognition of the work of art, in its physical consistency and in its twofold aesthetic and historical polarity, in view of its transmission into the future.*”<sup>13</sup>.

Of this passage and the definition which concludes it and which contains the fundamental theoretical, methodological and functional elements of restoration, it is interesting to highlight especially, with regard to the variables which together constitute the work of art object, another discrete conceptual parallel existing between restoration theory and psychology of art. In the latter, the work of art object is considered to result from its “form”<sup>14</sup>, which includes factors inextricably connected to each other: its material consistency, objectively identifiable and quantifiable, namely the “physical consistency”; its “perceptual structure”, the “visual pattern”<sup>15</sup>, meaning the “aesthetic instance”; the elements, historical, contingent and contextual, past and present, which pertain to it<sup>16</sup>, in other words, the “historical instance”.

### ***Physical consistency, aesthetic instance and phenomenological method***

To the restorer and the psychologist it is the “aesthetic instance” the form of the oeuvre manifests, without neglecting the “historical”, that determines the nature and the validity, respectively, of the intervention and the investigation. For this purpose and with respect to the methodology to be adopted, another discrete parallel emerges between Brandi's proposal and the prevailing method employed in the psychology of art: a phenomenological method.

While it is axiomatic that the matter of the work of art must be the sole object of the restoration, it is just as fundamental that the matter itself, understood as “that which is needed for the epiphany of the image”, be defined and analysed “by a phenomenological route”<sup>17</sup>.

The phenomenological stance to be adopted with regard to matter is, inevitably, also the one needed in facing the “aesthetics of the oeuvre” and which

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<sup>12</sup> Argenton, *cit.*, 1996, pp. 276-288.

<sup>13</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> R. Arnheim, *Art and visual perception. The new version*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Arnheim, *cit.*, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Argenton, *cit.*, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> C. Brandi, *Restauro*, in the *Enciclopedia Universale dell'Arte*, XI, Venezia-Roma 1963, cc. 322-332: c. 324.

sanctions its 'artisticity': "We can [...] specify that the work of art, so far as it should be discussed in relation to restoration, is the work of art *that is situated in the world*"<sup>18</sup>.

Even for the psychologist of art, despite the basic difference in intent, the main, if not the only, feasible methodological path is the phenomenological route, since its pre-eminent object of study – "the work of art *that is situated in the world*" – is very difficult to grasp from a quantitative point of view, presenting too great a number of variables to be controlled experimentally. Similarly, it is impossible, in the laboratory, to experimentally reproduce or simulate the situation in which the artistic phenomenon manifests or takes place: "Let me say [...] that when one talks of psychology of art as a science, it seems to me that it would be more productive not to refer so much to experimentation in the strict sense" but rather to "the type of psychology which, though equally scientific, trusts in description, in the demonstration and in the informal interpretation, when dealing with the complexity of the human mind"<sup>19</sup>.

The phenomenological method dealt with here, and which Brandi also deals with, has no extemporaneous or unsystematic character, but rather is founded on rigorous principles, first among them that of not making those so-called errors of stimulus and error of experience, that is to say, describing the object or the fact or the datum observed resorting to what one knows or presumes to know about it, or attributing properties to it which instead are inherent to one's phenomenal experience, while one should let the objects themselves "speak", thus maintaining a "natural" and "spontaneous" stance in the observation<sup>20</sup>.

### ***Potential unity of the work of art and Gestalt theory***

In illustrating the concept of "potential unity of the work of art"<sup>21</sup>, coherently with its phenomenological conception of the matter of the work of art, Brandi makes some considerations parallel to those which *Gestalt* psychologists set at the foundations of their theory and which constitute also the basis for psychological reading and comprehension of the work of art.

Brandi writes thus: "We must initially probe the possibility of attributing the feature of unity to the work of art, and specifically the unity which is due to the *whole*, and not the unity that is reached in the *total*"<sup>22</sup>.

The concept of unity, understood as a "whole" and not as a "total", or a sum of parts, elaborated by Brandi is the very same that lies at the foundations of *Gestalt* theory and is expressed namely by the term *Gestalt*, which indicates a structured totality, a whole, with its own form and with a nature that is not detectable through analysing the elementary parts it is composed of. This concept – summarised by the aphorism "the whole is different from the sum of its parts" – has an evident and exemplary application in art and is concisely illustrated by Arnheim: "That a whole cannot be attained by the accretion of isolated parts was not something that the artist had to be told [...] In the essay that gave Gestalt theory its name, Christian von Ehrenfels pointed out that if each of twelve

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<sup>18</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1994, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> R. Arnheim, *Le arti e la psicologia*, in L. Pizzo Russo (ed.), *Estetica e psicologia*, Bologna 1982, pp. 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> W. Metzger, *I fondamenti della psicologia della Gestalt*, Florence 1971, p. 15. For a concise exposition of the phenomenological method in psychology of art, see A. Argenton, *Arte e espressione. Studi e ricerche di psicologia dell'arte*, Padua 2008, pp. 26-36.

<sup>21</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

observers listened to one of the twelve tones of a melody, the sum of their experiences would not correspond to the experience of someone listening to the whole melody. Much of the later experimentation of the Gestalt theorists was designed to show that the appearance of any element depends on its place and function in an overall pattern”<sup>23</sup>.

Brandi and Arnheim, one from an aesthetic-philosophical perspective, the other from side of psychological investigation, one set to dictate the founding, general guidelines for restoration, the other turned to drawing, from a work of art, indications on the functioning of perception and cognition, both agreeing on the assumption that the work of art can only be known and recognised, in its aesthetic instance, as a structured totality, yet also agreeing, as a consequence of this assumption and based on their same phenomenological conception of the consciousness, that perceptual and representative processes which lead to grasping a work of art in its essence can only be of the intuitive, immediate and spontaneous kind, and not one logical, causal and functional.

### *The reception of the work of art*

Moving further along the construct of the unity of the work of art, Brandi presents the problem of whether such a unity should be understood by the same yardstick as the “organic and functional unity which is continuously laid down by experience”<sup>24</sup> or whether it is generated, and therefore should be received and understood, through a different kind of cognitive experience, in psychological terms, through a different cognitive procedure.

Having to grasp the essence and the unity of the work of art, logical inference, or any other intellectual operation, does not live up to the task: “in the image the work of art formulates, this work of experience seems reduced to a mere cognitive function within the ‘figurativity’ of the image: every postulate of organic integrity dissolves. *The image is truly and only that which appears*: the phenomenological reduction which serves to investigate the existing becomes, in Aesthetics, the very axiom which defines the essence of the image”<sup>25</sup>.

Hence, the cognitive procedure to activate, with respect to the work of art: “contemplation”, a term which obviously should not be understood in its transcendental or passive sense, but in that of active exploration and attentive observation, is characteristic in perceiving, in “seeing”<sup>26</sup>. In fact, “the intuitive and spontaneous reception of the work of art takes place [...] limiting the cognitive substance of the image, that is to say, its semantic value, to that which supplies the image and no more”<sup>27</sup>.

The “intuitive and spontaneous reception”, in Brandi’s words, is that which Arnheim calls “intuition” and which he defines as being “one particular property of perception, namely its ability to apprehend directly” – spontaneously – “the effect of an interaction taking place in a field or Gestalt situation”. “[And the arts] offer us the experience of watching intuition at work”<sup>28</sup>. Considered processually, “intuition is much less easily understood [than intellect] because we know it

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<sup>23</sup> Arnheim, *cit.*, 1974, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> G. Kanizsa, *Vedere e pensare*, Bologna 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, pp. 15-16.

<sup>28</sup> R. Arnheim, *New essays on the psychology of art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986, p. 28 and p. 32.

mostly by its achievements, whereas its mode of operation tends to elude awareness”<sup>29</sup>.

Despite its being more difficult to grasp, given to the very fact that it acts in ways different to those of logical and linear thought and that it is based on the activity of the senses, this cognitive ability is subject to investigation and interpretation: “The rules that control such organization have been extensively studied by Gestalt psychologists, with the principal finding that vision operates as a field process, meaning that place and function of each component is determined by the structure as a whole. Within this overall structure, which extends across space and time, all components depend upon one another, so that, for example, the color we perceive a certain object to be depends on the colors of its neighbors. By intuition, then, I mean the field or Gestalt aspect of perception”<sup>30</sup>.

The unity of the work of art and intuition, as the cognitive procedure for grasping essence and meaning, are therefore the two aspects, one structural, the other processual, that set the insurmountable limits for the restorer and, similarly, constitute reference parameters for the psychologist of art which allow the rigorous and scientific investigation, for its goals, of the work of art itself.

### ***From the applicatory perspective***

Up to now, the conceptual and methodological convergences – for the most part of an implicit character<sup>31</sup> – support the theory of a synergic effect deriving from an interdisciplinary similarities between conservators, restorers and psychologists of art.

All that is left is to make mention of what these convergences imply, always from a synergic perspective, with regard to the practice of conservation and restoration.

In terms of the psychological theory referred to, the visual work of art possesses in itself, its “structural skeleton” and in its “form”<sup>32</sup> those “expressive” values<sup>33</sup> which make it an “objective percept”<sup>34</sup>, thus allowing one to investigate and identify a goodly number of factors – i.e., conditions, effects, laws and principles – characterising, together and universally, the ‘phenomenal’ experience of the relationship with the work of art itself. Well, the studies carried out on visual perception<sup>35</sup> and, in particular, those on aesthetic perception, constitute a wealth of acquisitions with regard to conditions, effects, laws and principles relating: to perception in general (balance, weight, direction, simplicity, dynamics, *Prägnanz*, tension, ...); to the perception of the shape (subdivision, similarity and difference, leveling and sharpening, constancy, ...); to the perception of space (figure and ground, contour, deformation, overlapping, amodal completion, ...); to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> That is to say, that they are such in substance but not in the kind of language in which they manifest or in the kind of cultural or scientific backwaters from which they may originate.

<sup>32</sup> Arnheim, *cit.*, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> Argenton, *cit.*, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Arnheim, *cit.*, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> The amount of literature on this subject is enormous. To cite a few classics, referring to the *Gestalt* school which more than any other has contributed in this field, see R. Arnheim, *Visual thinking*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969; G. Kanizsa, *Grammatica del vedere*, Bologna 1980; K. Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, London 1935. Even the manuals are legion; to cite a quite recent and exhaustive one in Italian, even though there is no mention of aesthetic perception, see F. Purgé, N. Stucchi, S. Olivero (eds.), *La percezione visiva*, Turin 1999.

the perception of brightness and colour (light, illumination, shadow, assimilation and contrast ...); etc.

All factors, these just now listed in part and sparsely, which together with others, without disregarding those a material, historical, cultural or contextual nature, obviously, play a crucial role in the “intuitive and spontaneous reception of the work of art”<sup>36</sup> and the rigorous awareness of which can only render more knowledgeable and, hopefully, as effective as possible, the solution to the various problems presented by conservation and restoration; even if they may concern, for example, the conservation of fresh lettuce, an essential component of a certain pop oeuvre, or the loss of fluorescence of a given noble gas, not replaceable as it is not produced industrially and is an indispensable element for the fruition of a certain neon sculpture. These are new problems, compared to those, for example, concerning the conservation of an etching or the fading of a fresco, but which, all things considered, can still be faced and resolved with respect to “aesthetic perception”, in any kind of oeuvre.

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<sup>36</sup> Brandi, *cit.*, 1977, p. 15.