

**Publication:** The Art Newspaper

**Date:** December 2006

## *Conserving Contemporary Art*

by Simon Gillespie

*Keep artists away from their own work*

Speaking as a conservator and restorer of many years standing, I find it imperative to keep artists away from their works of art. The involvement of the artist with his work of art should end the moment the artist has decided that it is finished or when the work of art leaves the studio. It is no longer the artist's problem or domain to be involved with that work of art after the artist has stopped the creative process.

This has become very apparent recently with Damien Hirst's involvement in his famous '*The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*', which began to deteriorate and so was replaced with another, entirely different shark; namely bypassing the restoration process completely. Does this shark have the same personality? What will happen after the artist's death when the new shark continues to deteriorate? The restorer will then be thrown into the equation and will have to do something with this object. This brings into question the difference between restoration and conservation.

Conservation of course covers all disciplines and is summed up by trying to keep an object as near to its original condition as is possible, with the least amount of interference. Restoration is quite different, the intention being to return the object as near to its original state as is possible. In the case of a painting with a hole in it, for example, one would repair the hole, fill, texture and retouch it, hence restoration. Whereas with certain artefacts, it is necessary to stop them from deteriorating further so that we can study the remnants in their true and unadulterated form, this is conservation. In the case of a picture, halting further deterioration is often achieved by controlling the atmosphere where the picture is kept, similarly, conserving it.

Many a travesty has been caused by artists restoring their own paintings where not only the repair of the object is haphazardly carried out, but enthusiastic updating is quite commonly practised, much to the detriment of the object. In the restoration studio, we see these examples often and in turn, this opens up another question about whether we should be

undoing a painter's restoration. A recent instance of this was when an artist who painted a series of ten paintings decided to restore one of the pictures that had been damaged by water. Stepping up into the job, the artist readily over-painted a dark watermark in the sky area with a Prussian blue pigment. The fact that the nine other pictures had been painted in ultramarine did not seem to matter! The trained conservator however, would have cleaned the dark residue from the surface of the picture and if necessary, minimally retouched in the correct pigment, taking care not to cover the original paint.

More recent studies into this problem of artists being involved with their art and how to deal with unusual materials, has been highlighted recently at the Whitney Museum in New York and also at the Tate where artists have been interviewed about their technique and the materials they use in order to have records of this from the horses mouth. Whether it is oil paint or camel dung, this resource will be enormously useful in the future for conservators and art historians alike. This information will also help one of the next great problems of contemporary art today with the display of installation art which has been fraught with many difficulties. For example Richard Long and his subtle use of stone circles and sensuous shapes in the landscape that he produces are quite different from the collector's handyman who is presented with a crate of stones and a ball of string to mark out the circle in which to put these objects. Is it really the same thing?

As a conservator, I have found it very useful to deal with an artist who is still living. A quick phone call can clear up many problems. However, if the artist is still alive, I maintain that they should be kept away from the actual restoration process which should be executed by an unbiased professional. It is the job of conservators with their training and expertise to consult the artist if they are alive but they should nevertheless investigate, test and research the methods and materials which have been used. When satisfied, they should employ their expertise to either restore or conserve the work using all the information they have to hand. To conserve and to restore is a very different job from that of the artist and the process of creation; each to their own.

**The writer is a restorer in London.**