

Cesare Brandi and contemporary art: theory, aesthetic and restoration. A tempestuous dialectic

CARLOTA SANTABÁRBARA MORERA

Translation by Valerie Magar

Abstract

Cesare Brandi's theory of restoration is conditioned by his philosophical foundation and his critical vision of art; therefore, in order to understand Brandi's thinking, it is imperative to know his conception of aesthetics and the relationship he established between art criticism and its fundamental philosophy, which underlies the basis of his concept of art and his approach to the restoration of the art of his time. Cesare Brandi experienced a remarkable evolution in his relationship with contemporary art, which initially was completely contrary to avant-garde and abstractionism due to the lack of formal representation or image. However, after he acquired more knowledge and with the awakening of his admiration for artists like Burri, he later found it possible to include abstraction and the absence of an image in the definition of what he considered art. Although his definition of restoration seems to be constrained to traditional art in terms of material fabric and image, his concept of restoration can be applied to contemporary art from the standpoint of a more flexible view of his ideas.

Keywords: Contemporary art, restoration, art theory, patina, material.

The concept of restoration for Cesare Brandi

Cesare Brandi (1906-1986), restorer, historian and scholar of Italian art, whose thinking is the starting point and foundation of critical restoration, is undoubtedly one of the 20th century's key figures in the field of restoration of cultural heritage. Known internationally for his *Teoria del restauro*, published in 1963 (Brandi, 1963a), which compiled writings and lessons made during the two decades in which he directed the *Istituto Centrale del Restauro*, ICR, an organization founded in 1939 together with Giulio Carlo Argan (1909-1992), Brandi combined in his theory of restoration the two cases that had remained in a dialectical struggle during the previous century: the historical case and the aesthetic case "Restoration should aim to re-establish the potential oneness of the work of art, as long as this is possible without committing artistic or historical forgery, and without erasing every trace of the passage through time of the work of art" (Brandi, 2005: 50).

Brandi was very prolific in the dissemination of texts,¹ with 50 books, and 115 essays and articles published mainly in journals, which were later collected in the volume *Il patrimonio insidiato. Scritti sulla tutela del paesaggio e dell'arte* (Brandi, 2001). Similarly, there are numerous articles published in periodicals such as *Le Arti*, *L'Immagine* or the *Bolletino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro*, a journal he directed for more than a decade (1950-1960).

¹ An updated bibliography was compiled in Roig Picazo and González Tornel (2008: 237-239).

In it he wrote on many topics of great complexity, highlighting especially the texts that denote his personal and characteristic way of understanding restoration as a critical activity, and the reflection on the past and its professional discipline: Art History.

Regarding the issues he addressed throughout his writings, we should first mention the definition he made of restoration as: "the methodological moment in which the work of art is recognized, in its physical being, and its dual aesthetic and historical nature, in view of its transmission to the future" (Brandi, 2005: 48). From this definition it is clear that only the material of the work of art is restored and that this is a priority in the restoration processes. Nevertheless, important to understand that this material is, in effect, the union of both its structure (*flagranza*) and its aspect (*astanza*), and to be aware that this material aspect, which corresponds to the image, has preeminence over the structural part.

Many lamentable and destructive errors have come about because of failures to investigate the material constituents of works of art for both appearance and structure. For example, there is a common misapprehension that unquarried marble is no different than marble that has been worked into a statue. (This could be called the 'illusion of immanence'). Whereas unquarried marble has only its physical makeup, the marble in a statue has undergone radical transformation to become the vehicle of an image. In doing so it has become a part of history thanks to the work of human hands. As a result, a chasm has opened up between its existence as calcium carbonate and its existence as an image. As an image, the marble of the statue has separated into appearance and structure, making structure subordinate to appearance (Brandi, 2005: 52).

For Brandi, creation was linked with the artistic and technical process. From this, the principles of restoration are derived, as well as the almost sacred respect for the original, and the material as something irreplaceable, which entails the visual recognition of the intervention treatment and its repeatability.

The concept of reversibility has not been fully addressed, notwithstanding its success founded in the work of the most important art historian-crusader in conservation. Cesare Brandi. Brandi himself prescribed, "each restoration treatment should not impide but instead facilitate any future treatments". This is not about reversibility but retractability. In today's world, retractability is what critical discussion, the contributions of science and conservation practice all identify as the non-utopian and realistically attainable objective (Giusti, 2006: 3-6).

Brandi defined restoration not as a regulation, but rather as a methodological process, with the necessary conditions to undertake it; he considered restoration as a critical act, undertaken to recover the potential oneness of the work of art without producing a historic forgery but, at the same time, without limiting it to mere conservation. He did not exactly define what art is, but he recognized it as a reality with qualities that are independent from the functionality of other objects, based on the premise that restoration implicitly means the recognition of the work of art as such. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how, for Brandi, restoration and criticism are identified as a single entity, constituting the starting point of his theory of restoration. Therefore, it is necessary to address his facet as a critic and his conception of art in order to delve into the dialectic he established in relation to his intervention criteria.

The concept of work of art for Cesare Brandi

Cesare Brandi's concept of restoration is well known, but we are interested in highlighting his figure as a critic and theoretician, an expert who knew the contemporary art of his time, a facet that is largely unknown and which is a determining factor in understanding how he conceived the conservation and restoration of modern art. This is mainly due to the fact that the vast amount of his philosophical and critical texts were almost all written in Italian. He wrote, are practically all in Italian. They works have been collected and re-edited fairly recently,² hence their transcendence has been clearly limited. As a result, his thinking on is practically unknown although it has a direct relationship with his conception of a work of art. For Brandi, restoration starts from the recognition of the work of art as such in the conscience of the individual:

(...)any behavior towards the work of art, including the intervention of restoration, depends on whether or not the recognition of the work of art as a work of art occurs. Therefore, also the quality and modality of the restoration intervention will be closely linked with this recognition, and even the restoration phase, which eventually the work of art may have in common with other products of human activity (Brandi, 2005: 48).

It is very interesting to see how Brandi based the definition of art on the very experience of art, in other words, on the recognition granted by the viewer: "A work of art, no matter how old or classic it is actually and not just potentially a work of art when it lives in some individualized experience (...) as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is aesthetically experienced"³ (Dewey in Brandi, 2005: 48). In the same way, he affirmed how the definition of art directly affects the restoration, but not the other way around: "Consequently, we have come to recognize the inseparable link between restoration and the work of art, in that the work of art conditions the restoration, and not vice versa" (Brandi, 2005: 48).

Brandi attributed symbolic values to art, but in no case semiotic values, as he asserted in *Le due vie*. Brandi stated that art "does not communicate," it is not the linguistic-communicative moment that defines the specificity of the work of art, but rather its perception and recognition as such.

Regarding the dynamic consideration of the artistic process, in the development of Brandi's theoretical work, a clear difference is made between the artistic image and reality, a problem already treated by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce and taken up by Brandi. Brandi was the one who drew the theory of artistic creation, individualizing two phases of the artistic process; first the construction of the object made by the artist, to which he attributed symbolic values that make it different from what it was (its raw material); and second, the formulation of the image, through which a reality is created. He called this pure reality because it is different from the real world that surrounds us, in other words, an intensified reality.

In relation to this differentiation between the two phases of artistic creation, we can clearly identify the concepts of *flagranza* and *astanza* linked to the work of art. The first one, *flagranza*, refers to the existential condition of art, the awareness of its physical presence at the moment it is perceived. In the field of restoration theory, it is identified with the subject of the composition of the work of art.

² As a matter of fact, his *Teoria generale della critica* would not be edited until 1974, and his critical texts have never been translated into Spanish.

³ This is something that characterized the theoretical thought of Cesare Brandi, an heir of the idealist aesthetic of Benedetto Croce, which enhances the aesthetic character of the work of art, even above the historic case.

The second concept, that of *astanza*, alludes to the presence and reception of the work of art in consciousness as pure reality, that is, the image. Simplifying this, we could say that *astanza* is the image or the form and fragrance of the material structure that supports it.

This specific way of existence of the work of art (which Brandi would call *astanza*) is essentially the being-in-the-world of the object every time a conscience "recognizes" it as a whole. The continued possibility of recognition over time is precisely what makes a work of art a work of art. This recognition is not immediate, but it is complex: the recognition of the object in the entirety of its formal inheritance (Antinucci, 1996: 18-19)⁴

The scope of the image can be extended to the subject, but does not identify with it, insofar as it is intangible; the object of restoration itself will be the material, but it is the obligation of all societies to safeguard the material as well as the image of the work of art, to conserve it and transmit it in an integral way to the future

Undoubtedly, Cesare Brandi knew how to gather the contemporary thoughts of his time and reflect the culture and philosophy of art corresponding to the moment in which he lived. As he himself affirmed, it was the indissoluble relation between restoration and aesthetics, given the idea that one has about art was reflected in the restorative activity.

Cesare Brandi and his role as an art critic. The relationship with the art of his time

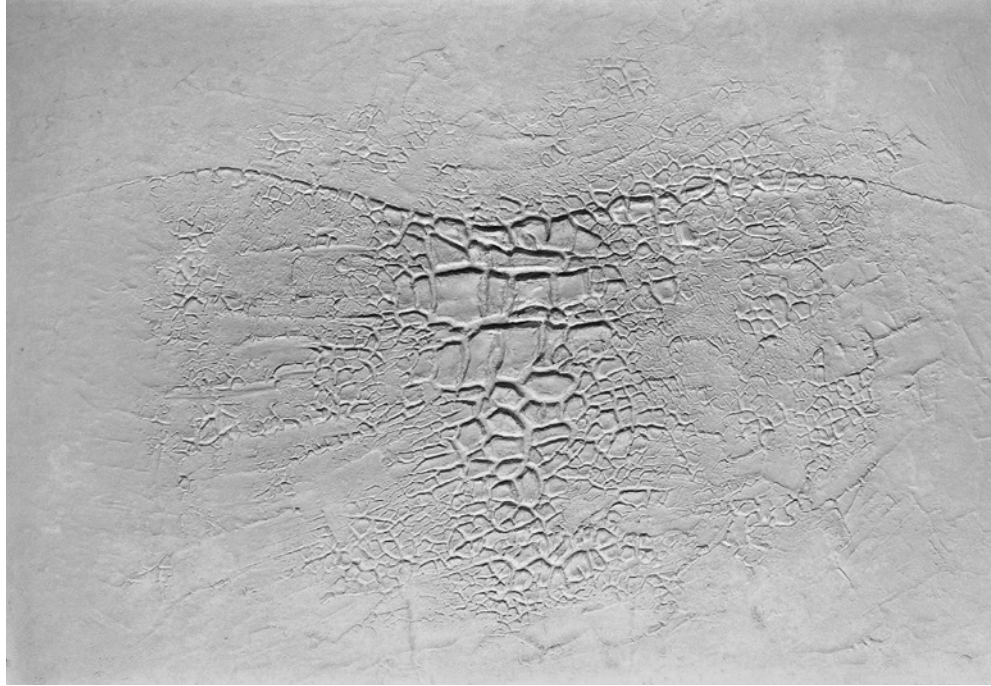
It is extremely relevant to be able to make an analysis of Brandi's theoretical thinking in global terms,⁵ in order to assess and take a critical stance related to his conception of what it considered art and his position in regard to contemporary art. In this sense, it is interesting to point out the great activity that Brandi produced as an essayist, developing reflections on art, aesthetics, theory and practice undertaken in the restoration treatments carried out in the campaigns by the ICR.

As an art historian, it is worth mentioning the special attention he paid to the art of Siena in its Golden Age (Duccio, the Lorenzetti, the artists from the *Quattrocento*), and to some great artists from the past (Giotto, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini, Borromini, Pietro da Cortona), while as a critic he focused his attention on some of his contemporary artists: Morandi, Manzù, Picasso, Braque, Guttuso, Burri, Afor, among others.⁶ The close relationship that he established between criticism and aesthetics was captured in the journal *Il Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro*, where he showed how criticism and restoration were intimately linked. In fact, in other texts as his first purely theoretical work, the first of the *Dialoghi di Elicon, Carmine o della pittura* (Brandi, 1945), had posed the problem of restoration as an issue that directly affected criticism, as for the formal qualification of the work of art.

⁴ "Questo modo particolare di esistere dell'opera d'arte (che Brandi battezzerà *astanza*) è in sostanza l'essere-nel-mondo dell'oggetto ogniqualvolta "riconosciuto" dalla coscienza nel suo completo corredo. La possibilità continua di riconoscimento nel tempo è appunto ciò che fa dell'opera d'arte un'opera d'arte. Riconoscimento non immediato, ma complesso: riconoscimento dell'oggetto nella pienezza del suo retaggio formale".

⁵ In global terms, Brandi's thought refers to the development of his thinking from a polyedric perspective, encompassing philosophy, critic, art and restoration theory.

⁶ Texts on critic that he published in monographies or in columns of *L'immagine*, a journal he founded and directed between 1947 and 1950. Among his most remarkable critics of contemporary art, we should undoubtedly mention: *Morandi* (Brandi, 1942), *Picasso* (Brandi, 1947), *La fine dell'avanguardia e l'arte d'oggi* (Brandi, 1952), *Braque, l'opera grafica* (Brandi, 1962), *Burri* (Brandi, 1963), *Giacomo Manzù, La porta di S. Pietro* (Brandi, 1964), *Scritti sull'arte contemporanea*, (Brandi, 2 vols., 1976 and 1979) and *Afro* (Brandi, 1977).



CRETTO. Alberto Burri, 1975. *Image: Public domain.*

We would therefore like to affirm that just as centuries of philosophical speculation were necessary to separate Aesthetics from Logic and Ethics, so centuries of manual work have been necessary to discern in restoration the indissoluble relationship with aesthetics. It is in this relationship that we see and base the stability of restoration, as a reflection of the very thought on art⁷ (Brandi, 1950: 5).

But, as it was affirmed by the Italian philosopher Massimo Carboni, a great expert on Cesare Brandi⁸ and on his relationship with contemporary art, “Brandi has had an undeniably complex, tempestuous, contradictory relationship”⁹ (Carboni, 1992: 125). It was a complex relationship in that he did not accept the avant-garde at first, but over time he began to admire some artists such as Morandi or Burri. Therefore, on this issue cannot give a univocal vision, given that his words are sometimes contradictory. This is due to the evolution of perspective experienced by the scholar himself, changing his way of thinking about the art of his time, so we can speak of a “first” Brandi who shaped his thought in the *Dialogues* of the 1940s and 1950s, when he clung to the negation of the vanguard; and, on the other hand, it would be necessary to speak of a “second” Brandi, during the 1960s and 1970s, who admitted the strong impact that the work of Burri produced him, which would lead him to accept him as an artist.

⁷ Original quotation: “Vorremmo dunque affermare che come occorsero secoli di speculazione filosofica per giungere a separare l’Estetica dalla Logica e dall’Etica, così sono occorsi secoli di manualità per giungere ad enucleare nel restauro il collegamento inscindibile con l’Estetica. È in questo collegamento che noi vediamo e fondiamo la stabilità del restauro, in quanto rifrazione del pensiero stesso sull’arte”.

⁸ Massimo Carboni and Lanfranco Secco Suardo were the most expert scholars on the analysis of Brandi’s work.

⁹ Original quotation: “Brandi ha avuto un rapporto innegabilmente complesso, tormentato, contraddittorio.”

Therefore, in order to understand the tempestuous and contradictory link between Cesare Brandi and contemporary art, we must consider his figure from the view of the search for balance between philosophy, theory and criticism, as well as from his perspective of art as a representation of the image:

*his great ability to maintain an admirable balance between the theoretical, philosophical, aesthetic reflection, of extremely high quality, and a propensity to a direct and immanent reading of the work of art, showing a lenticular attention to the singularity which, more than 'represent', embodies something*¹⁰ (Carboni, 2013: 1).

His position was absolutely controversial with respect to contemporary art due to his opposition to the avant-garde movements and to the constructivist artistic movements, since initially his idea of modern art ended with Picasso. He appreciated the artist from Malaga and accepted him, but he rejected the styles that lacked a formal representation that differed from pure reality, which is why he criticized movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism. There is no doubt that the conflict arose in Brandi's thinking when focused on the analysis of Morandi's painting and with it, of Cubism and metaphysics. This is because, in his perspective as a critic, Brandi understood art as a formal representation of reality, as a finished work, rejecting the concept of identification that was made between art and life in Neo-Dadaism or Pop Art. In this sense, Carboni affirms that these are artistic manifestations that escape the definition that Brandi made of art: "How can we pretend to accept *body-art* and conceptual art, *performance* and *arte povera* and the infinite variations on Duchamp's theme of the *ready-made*?"¹¹ (Carboni, 2013: 11). One could say that Brandi, in general, adopted an attitude towards contemporary art that was merely conservative or passive, reaffirming his denial of modern art in his essay *La fine dell'avanguardia* (Brandi, 1949: 361-433). In this text, Brandi made a fierce criticism of current reality, which he described as prosaic and, in relation to the lack of quality often shielded by quantity, thus justifying the novel concept of multiplicity in art. This is because he considered art, ultimately, as a consequence of the modes of expression of contemporary society. Brandi, therefore, declared himself openly against abstraction and informalism, since they lacked figuration:

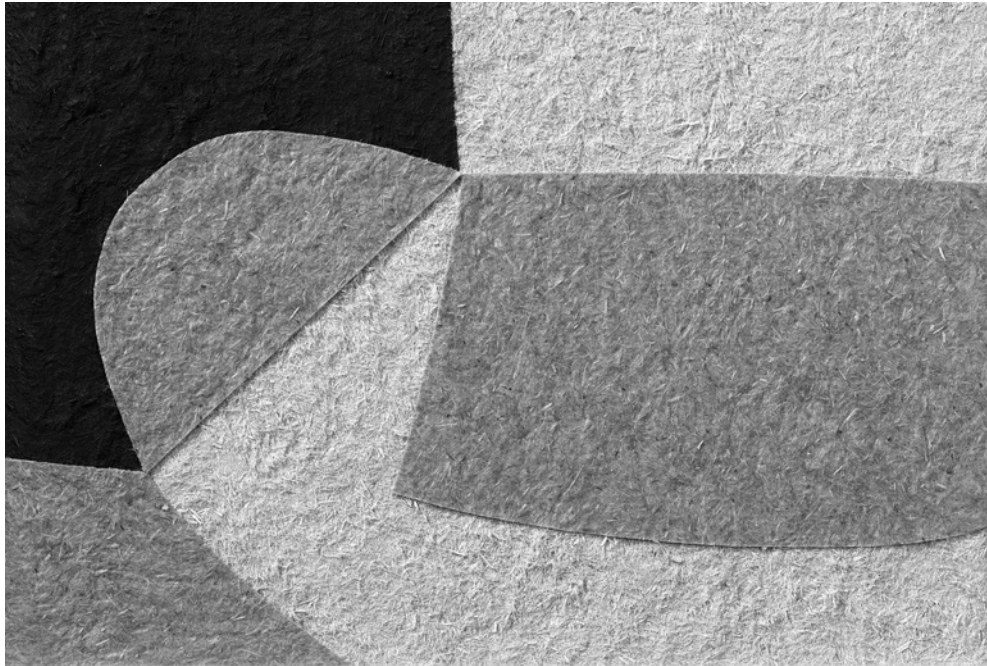
*the abstraction and the informalism is a serious alteration of the correct relationship between the sign and the image, and the creative way towards the pure form. Brandi could not pretend that artists like Pollock or Fautrier, Hartung or Tobey simply did not exist, artists who embodied the ethical and spiritual crisis that he had diagnosed*¹² (Carboni, 2013: 13-4).

Brandi criticized abstract art for being an image lacking a sign, a representation and, thus, for lending itself to the interpretation of the viewer. But for Brandi the worst thing was the objectification of art: "In turn, the image-sign will have gone back to the object, and a fragment of effective reality: the separation between figurativeness and cognitive substance is then revealed to be mortal" (Carboni, 1992: 138). The experience of abstraction is judged to be

¹⁰ Original quotation: "sua grande capacità di mantenere un mirabile equilibrio tra una riflessione teorica, filosofica, estetica di assoluto prim'ordine, e una propensione alla lettura diretta e immanente dell'opera d'arte, mostrando una lenticolare attenzione alla *singolarità* che, più che 'rappresentare', essa senz'altro incarna."

¹¹ Original quotation: "E come potremmo pretendere accettasse la *body-art* e l'arte concettuale, la *performance* e l'arte povera e le infinite variazioni sul tema duchampiano del *readymade*".

¹² Original quotation: "L'Astrattismo o l'Informale una grave alterazione nel corretto rapporto tra segno e immagine en el camino creativo verso la forma pura. Brandi non poteva fingere che artisti come Pollock o Fautrier, Hartung o Tobey semplicemente non esistessero, artisti che per di più incarnavano a vista proprio quella crisi etica e spirituale da lui stesso diagnosticata".



CELLOTEX W 1. Alberto Burri, 1980. Image: Public domain.

“absolutely inconceivable and unjustifiable according to the structure of artistic creation,”¹³ (Brandi in Carboni, 1992: 138). Despite this assertion, and despite the denial of modern art, it is necessary to mention how, in the 1930s, Brandi supported with his critics young (and also subversive) artists such as Afro, Manzú, Mirko, Mafai, thus beginning to also consider Morandi and Picasso. In this sense, Brandi considered the figure of Picasso as the culmination of a historical period, highlighting the ability that Picasso achieved in the 1920s in synthetic cubism, but nevertheless he rejected analytic cubism because of its link to abstraction.

In 1963 Brandi wrote an essay on Burri (Brandi, 1963c), valuing him very positively in his *Teoria generale* and retracting his previous assertions.¹⁴ The case of Burri is noteworthy, as Carboni describes, since it was a paradigm shift for Brandi who, after being introduced to his work, not only praised him, but also retracted some of his theoretical approaches in relation to the formalism of art.¹⁵ He showed how recovery takes place substantially through sublimation, in other words what he calls “the reckless suspension of the catharsis of form”¹⁶ (Carboni, 1992: 152). It is very interesting to note how in *Segno and immagine* (Brandi, 1960) and in *Le due*

¹³ Original quotation: “assolutamente inconcepibile e ingiustificabile secondo la struttura della creazione artistica”.

¹⁴ But the artists that were truly decisive and fundamental in this path, the three who most intensely influenced his theoretical-critical reflection and changed his direction were: Picasso, Morandi and Burri. Only in them, and mostly in the latter given his key position, did Brandi find a reflection of the best constitutive and undeniable reasons of his own search, in his path as an intellectual. Picasso, as the true rupture with the *Ottocento* and the *Novecento*. Morandi, as the emblem of the highest balance between the constitution of the object and the formulation of the image. Burri as the revelator, “subversive” and yet “classic”, of the most advanced results in contemporary painting (Carboni, 1992: 143-144).

¹⁵ It is no coincidence that in the monograph on Burri in 1963 the theme of the integration of the viewer in the work, developed in *Le due vie*, is seen for the first time in literal terms; it was a key element for Brandi in the understanding of the particular productive-receptive situation of modernity in art “Matter in Burri is an event, an act, a silent but inescapable presence; hence its accidents: buckling, tears, burns and abrasions are real ‘appearances’, epiphanies. The essence is a phenomenon. But the really crucial and decisive passage is that in Burri the material undergoes a process of formalization, a strenuous will to give form. (...) However, at the same time, the issue remains a fact, an act, the act. Here is the inherent dialectic, and the fruitful ambiguity of Burri’s work. It seems like giving birth” (Carboni, 1992: 151-152).

¹⁶ Original quotation: “temeraria sospensione alla catarsi della forma”.

vie (Brandi, 1966), Brandi shifts his position, and in both texts he gives a positive account of artistic movements such as informalism or abstraction, Neo-Dada or Pop Art, which years ago he had denied, as well as the aesthetic use of photomechanical reproduction. In this manner, Brandi moved significantly away from his initial value judgments about abstraction.

In this statement we observe a great lucidity in his ability to adapt to the change of thought, which Massimo Carboni described as *intellectual honesty*. In this way, a change of perspective took place in 1974: ¹⁷ "With great intellectual honesty, a large field of contemporary artistic development is recovered through a redefinition of his theoretical assumptions, through the critical acquisition and personal use of what was being developed in artistic practice and its recent history"¹⁸ (Carboni, 2013: 15).

The philosophical thought of Cesare Brandi. Beyond the Crocian aesthetic

Although still been largely unknown, the importance of aesthetics and Brandi's thinking is of great relevance, not only in the field of restoration, but also in the field of art theory and criticism of his time.

Professor Giuseppe Basile¹⁹ has already remarked how Brandi's theory of restoration is not only a theory, but it constitutes a philosophical conception of the concept of art itself: "(...) it is an integral part of a philosophical conception of art, which recognizes in this activity the highest expression of human creativity"²⁰ (Basile, 2004: 143)

Brandi's book *Teoria del restauro* started from an intimate relationship between philosophy and aesthetics, which surpassed the prevailing empiricism to propose an eminently critical approach. Carboni affirms that Brandi's theory of restoration starts from philosophical axioms on the work of art: "The same methodical articulation of a text such as *Teoria del restauro* is presented with a lucid and crystalline logical construction, in which the premises of philosophical-aesthetic nature, called axioms, are deduced"²¹ (Carboni, 1992: 107).

In reference to his philosophical thinking, Brandi is heir to the European tradition, as Giuseppe Basile affirmed, since "he is inspired by the highest tradition of European philosophy, from Plato to Kant and from Hegel to Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, Sartre, and he maintains fruitful exchanges with contemporary authors such as Arnheim, Jacobson and Barthes"²² (Roig Picazo

¹⁷ Publication date of the *Teoria generale della critica*.

¹⁸ Original quotation: "Con grande onestà intellettuale, viene in tal modo recuperato un ampio settore degli sviluppi artistici contemporanei attraverso una ridefinizione dei propri presupposti teorici mediata dall'acquisizione critica – e la frequentazione personale – di ciò che nella prassi artistica e nelle sue vicende si andava svolgendo".

¹⁹ Giuseppe Basile (Castelvetrano, 1942 - Rome, 2013). He was one of the greatest promoters of the figure of Cesare Brandi as theoretician and founder of the current theory of restoration. He made an exhaustive job of disseminating his work abroad. Giuseppe Basile was trained by Cesare Brandi in Art History in 1964 at the University of Palermo, and he was later a student of Giulio Carlo Argan in Rome (1965-1967) where he continued to be trained in Art History. Since 1976 he worked as an art historian at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro (now called Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro) of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, where from 1987 he directed the Service for intervention treatments on artistic and historical heritage. In 1991 he became a teacher at the School of Specialization in Art History at the University of La Sapienza in Rome (*Teoria e storia del restauro delle opere d'arte*), and in 1995 he became a member of the Pontifical Commission for Cultural Heritage of the Church and of the Pontifical Commission of Archeology of the Sacred.

²⁰ Original quotation: "é parte integrante de uma concepção filosófica da arte, que reconhece nesta atividade a expressão mais alta da criatividade humana".

²¹ Original quotation: "La stessa articolazione metodica di un testo come *Teoria del restauro* si presenta con una lucidissima e cristallina costruzione logica, in cui serrate deduzioni conseguono a premesse di ordine filosofico-estetico".

²² Original quotation: "se inspira en la tradición más elevada de la filosofía europea, de Platón a Kant y de Hegel hasta Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, Sartre, y mantiene fecundos intercambios con autores contemporáneos como Arnheim, Jacobson y Barthes".

and González Tornel, 2008: 234). Although it is undeniable that his thinking was also based on the aesthetics of Croce and the theory of the Gestalt, as well as on Dewey's phenomenology (Verbeeck-Boutin, 2009), since he was framed in the aesthetic philosophy of Crocian idealism, but undertook his own personal trajectory. In fact he can be considered the first post-Crocian aesthetic.

Brandi assumed from Kant the concept of category of work of art, which he would then apply to his theory of restoration; while from Husserl he adopted his phenomenological conception of art. Certainly Brandi cannot be defined as phenomenological, but his aesthetic thinking has some influence of this current in terms of his conception of artistic creation, to investigate what happens before the work takes its form (in other words, his theory is not properly phenomenological, since it is nourished by other influences, such as Croce's idealistic aesthetics); it can be said that he uses "phenomenological tools" (D'Angelo, 2006: 48).

In tune with Husserl's thought, the constitution of the work of art for Brandi, demands the artist's effort to separate the object from the reality in which he is immersed. Such distinction is made by separating and differentiating between *flagranza* and *astanza*

Reality and existence are different (...) Reality occurs In intuition. Existence in the intellect (...) consciousness, which is intuition and intellect, can liberate the reality of each existence, and freely choose a reality without existence (...) this reality is the pure reality (...) of art²³ (Brandi, 1992: 33, 47-48).

His conception of the phenomenology of artistic creation in *Carmine* (Brandi, 1945) is very interesting; here he defined the artistic process as a dynamic process between the artistic image and reality. An issue raised by Croce and strongly restated in the writings of Brandi; "but he was not a blind Crocian follower; from Croce he inherited, on the one hand, the rejection of any positivist determinism and, on the other, the concept of autonomy, individuality and timelessness of the work of art"²⁴ (Noriega, 2008: 157-165).

Regarding the dynamic consideration of the artistic process, in the development of Brandi's theoretical work the difference between the artistic image and reality is presented, a problem already treated by Croce and picked up by Brandi. He traced the theory of the artistic creation, individualizing two phases of the artistic process, in the first place the construction of the object made by the artist, to which he attributed symbolic values that turn it into something different from what it was (its raw materials), and in second place, the formulation of the image, through which a reality is created, which he called pure reality because it is different from the real world that surrounds us; that is, an intensified reality.

Cesare Brandi and the restoration of contemporary art

Undoubtedly the philosophical conception of art and his own aesthetic theory, conditioned his perception and appreciation of contemporary art.

²³ Original quotation: "Nell'intuizione di dà la realtà, nell'intelletto l'esistenza (...) la coscienza, che è intuizione e intelletto, può andare anche oltre e depurare interamente la realtà dell'esistenza (...) realtà che merita il nome di pura (...) solo all'arte compete la realtà pura".

²⁴ Original quotation: "pero no fue un crociano al pie de la letra, de Croce heredó, por un lado, el rechazo a cualquier determinismo positivista y, por otro, el concepto de autonomía, individualidad y atemporalidad de la obra de arte".

Dialectic between fabric and image

Brandi proposed dialectics between matter and image in contemporary art that would significantly affect the way to face the restoration of contemporary art. For Brandi, matter is not only material consistency, but it is what allows the expression of the image, added to the fact that it always gave prominence to aesthetics, to the image, above what came to be known as physical consistency.

Whenever the condition of a work of art is found to require the sacrifice of part of its material, the sacrifice, or any other treatment, must be performed from the viewpoint of what the aesthetic requires. The aesthetic case always takes precedence, since the uniqueness of the work of art compared to other human products does not depend on its material being, or on its dual historic nature, but on its artistic nature. Once the artistic nature is lost, nothing but the relic remains (Brandi, 2005: 49).

However, in modern art (especially in Dadaism, installations and ephemeral art), the choice of material has a special meaning when referring to the absence of material permanence, the iconographic value that is given to the material, as well as the importance of the decision that led the artist to use a specific material. "According to phenomenological aesthetics, a work of art is an entity which comprises both a physical, material, layer as well as a broadly-conceived and difficult to define conceptual layer" (Jadzinska, 2008: 263). Therefore, the conservation of material in modern art will not be so easy, but it will consist of maintaining that tension between the material structure and the conceptual structure, taking into account a large number of variables, such as the material substance, the state of conservation, the changes suffered over time, its aesthetic integrity, the recognition of the intangible meaning and the message of the work, something Heidegger called the *dee welt* of the work of art.

For many contemporary works of art the preservation of the original material is possible, necessary, and forms the basis -as Brandi foresaw- for any future interpretation. In not all cases is that enough, or even desirable. The ideas of permanence and immutability and stability are conceptually incompatible with certain works such as those created from ephemeral materials, most frequently installations, or conceptual art (Jadzinska, 2008: 263).

This attention to material in the work of art raised by Brandi is, without a doubt, one of the biggest differences between the restoration of a historical work and contemporary art, but there are other circumstances to be taken into account.

The main reasons that make the application of Brandi's restoration criteria to contemporary art difficult are, in the first place, that in contemporary art the performing hand of the artist is replaced by that of third persons. The artist, in many cases, is limited to generating the idea or the project, but does not actually execute it. If the value of authenticity is granted by the mere fact of being executed directly by the artist who conceived it, the work loses its value as a material object. It is replaced with the pre-eminence of the idea or concept. In fact, in certain cases, the works are commissioned without any physical participation by the artist.

In conjunction with this approach, it is necessary to mention Francesco Lo Savio's *Theory of the project*, which places the role of art in the idea as the genesis of its material creation, an artistic theory that is contemporary to that of Brandi.

The artist took on the project as the most significant moment in the artistic process, an original and decisive act of creation, which is why he entrusts the creation to third parties. For him the execution does not count, since the work is already complete as a project, before formulating the idea, with all the necessary numbers and measures for its possible realization²⁵ (Rava, 1992: 85).

Lo Savio is thus opposed to a theory based on the materiality of the work of art and how to preserve it, since for him, the *raison d'être* of creation is in the generating idea, in the project, thus being opposed to Brandi's ideas based on the restoration of the material because it is in it that the aesthetic and historical cases of works of art reside.

From a theoretical and philosophical point of view, the difference that Massimo Carboni established between traditional art and contemporary art is very pertinent. It is something he calls: "the work of contingency, since much of contemporary art alludes to, in the very act of presenting itself, to its own disappearance, to an intentional and irremediable expiration"²⁶ (Carboni, 2014: 9). However, there are cases where the difference between the durability of the material and the materiality of the work of art, in Brandi's sense of the material as a vehicle for the epiphany of an image, imposes a more complex conservation and an interpretative choice. In relation to *arte povera* we often find materials that have rapidly weathered, as is the case, for example, of *La tela di Penelope*, by Pino Pascali (1968) in the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna*, Rome, which after being exposed for several years, presented a state of oxidation of wood brushes that did not allow its continued exposure. As Professor Valentini²⁷ mentioned "Maybe the material of Pascali's work is not in those specific scrub brushes, but it's the idea itself of the canvas" (Valentini, 2008: 78).



PENELOPE'S WEB. Pascal Pino, 1968. *Image: Public domain.*

²⁵ Original quotation: "Al elaborar una 'teoría del proyecto' el artista asumió el proyecto en sí como el momento más significativo del proceso artístico, acto original y decisivo de la creación; por eso encarga la realización a terceros. Para él la ejecución no cuenta, puesto que la obra ya está completa como proyecto, antes de formular la idea, con todos los números y medidas necesarios para su posible realización".

²⁶ Original quotation: "L'opera della contingenza. Molta parte delle arti contemporanee allude, nell'atto stesso di presentarsi, alla sua propria sparizione, ad un'intenzionale, irrimediabile caducità".

²⁷ Francesca Valentini studied Sciences of Cultural Heritage (BA 2006, State University of Milano) and specialized in History of Modern and Contemporary Art (MA 2009, University Ca' Foscari-Venice in cooperation with the IUAV-Venice, Université François Rabelais-Tours and Harvard University). Since 2011, she has been developing her doctoral research as a member of a.r.t.e.s. graduated at the Faculty of Humanities in Cologne in association with the Research PhD in Philosophy at the University Ca' Foscari-Venice.

Therefore, the material in the work of contemporary art will not only be the support of the image it expresses, but will be part of the poetics of its construction. It is impregnated with meaning and symbolisms and lacking, in many cases, the autograph character with which historical artworks are impregnated and recognized as such.

Contemporary creation is gradually losing its character as an object and tends to become a gesture, an action or a process. This could be compared with a dance or a performance, that is, an art without a physical object as its support and this could lead us to question to what extent an action can be preserved. Therefore the conservation of contemporary art will not imply the direct conservation of the physical object, but another type of operation that leads to the conservation of the memory of that aesthetic and cultural experience.

In this sense, when Brandi spoke of the maximum respect for the original, today we conceive "the original" or "the authentic", not as a value that resides in the material, but in the creative idea, in the artistic expression or in the sensory experience, that is, in the project or in the artistic concept itself.

In this progressive conceptualization of artistic practices with the consequent negation of the aesthetic-formal meaning in favor of the procedural and reflective aspect, only one thing is missing: ending the physicality of the artistic object, annihilating it, and reducing art to the concept²⁸ (Sureda, Guasch 1987: 150-151).

Since the mid-20th century, art has evolved from a material representation that consisted of a physical support and the representation of an image, to an art based on the perception of a new conceptual language, where there apparently continues to be a subject supporting an image. But art evolves towards the denial of its physical character.

Faced with this situation, for Brandi the recognition of a work of art resided in the consciousness of its physical and material consistency. He established that only the material of the work of art was restored and that this was composed in turn by its perception. We have to understand from a contemporary perspective, how the material, as an abstract concept that supports the represented image of a work of art, does not have to coincide with its physical character or, in other words, with the materials of which it is composed. Instead, it would be about the support that allows the viewer's perception of it. This concept is fundamental for the restoration of contemporary art. The theoretical problem that we face today is not so much the identification of what the materials of contemporary art are, but the decision of which *material*, in the Brandian sense of a work of contemporary art, must be restored. The material of a contemporary work of art is often just an idea. Therefore, we could say that in contemporary art, the value of the material is the meaning attributed to it: "The contemporary work of art includes and experiments with all kinds of materials, which do not have any value per se, but for the significance which the artist attributes to it" (Valentini, 2008: 77).

Time in the work of art

On the other hand, Brandi is aware that in contemporary art the reception of the work of art becomes part of the creative process of the work, since the viewer has to participate in its perception and interpretation, thus completing the message in order to understand the intention of the artist. And as a consequence of the instantaneousness that characterizes

²⁸ Original quotation: "En esta progresiva conceptualización de las prácticas artísticas con la consiguiente negación del significado estético-formal en favor del aspecto procesual y reflexivo, sólo falta una cosa: acabar con la fisicidad del objeto artístico, aniquilarlo, y reducir el arte al concepto".

the current society, there is a contradiction with the Cesare Brandi's division of the three times of, which is based on an analysis emanating from phenomenology, and not from the more formal aspect. According to Cesare Brandi, the three times of a work of art are: the duration, the interval and the moment. The first one consists of the formulation-creation of the work of art by the artist. The second, the interval, is the time lapse interposed between the formulation and the reception by the viewer, the time until the work is considered to be a work of art. And third, is the instant of this irruption of the work of art in consciousness.

*Restoration, to be a legitimate operation, should not assume that time is reversible or abolish history. (...) This historical requirement must be translated not only into the differentiation of the reintegrated zones, but also in the respect of the patina and in the preservation of witnesses in the state prior to the restoration*²⁹ (Brandi, 1963b: 322-332).

For Brandi when the creative process has been finalized, it cannot be reopened or returned to it. The artist himself cannot activate it in any way; he can only create a new work or rework the previous work, thus creating a new one. The recognition of the work of art in our conscience demands its conservation, of its physical means; hence the affirmation that only the material of the work of art is restored. When restoration is intended to return the work of art at the time of the formulation-creation, it represents a restoration of *ripristino* or a reconstruction, abolishing the time between creation and the present. In other words, the historical time is canceled.

Brandi made a radical critique of interventions that tried to return to a presumable original state, since they alter the historicity of the work of art as a substantial basic presupposition in the theory of restoration. It is very interesting to observe how Cesare Brandi, despite insisting upon the need to respect for the times of the work of art, added that: "each case has to be evaluated individually and never at the expense of the aesthetic case, which is always takes precedence" (Brandi, 2005: 64).

The Italian philosopher Massimo Carboni discussed how the historical work of art was conceived as something immutable that should be preserved and conserved from external agents, but with the avant-garde, transience and fugacity are introduced as artistic concepts.

The notion of time and its relevance for the preservation of contemporary art is also confronted by the German restorer Ursula Schädler-Saub, when making reference to the words of Umberto Eco, in relation to the separation of the temporal phases of the work of art that Brandi made (the time that the work is created, the moment that the work is finished and when it is socially recognized as such), but in contemporary art it is more complex due to the extension of the concept of "open work".

I wish to emphasize in particular Brandi's conclusion that every act of restoration and presentation of an artwork is bound by time and carries intrinsic signs of that time. (...) And that is not all, but the most important point is that the views of the work and its reception will change in the course of time (Schädler-Saub, 2010: 65).

²⁹ Original quotation: "Il restauro, per rappresentare un'operazione legittima, non dovrà presumere né il tempo come reversibile né l'abolizione della storia. (...) Nell'attuazione pratica questa esigenza storica dovrà tradursi non solo nella differenza delle zone integrate, ma nel rispetto della patina e nella conservazione di campioni dello stato precedente al restauro".

Patina

One of the main problems that gives rise to the need to intervene in works of art is the effect of the passage of time on them. This phenomenon that affects not only paintings, sculptures, buildings, but also the rest of the cultural heritage, is manifested in a special way on the surface of the objects and receives the name of patina³⁰ (Hernández, 1999: 169).

Brandi defended that, from the historical point of view, the conservation of patina, as conservation of the particular obfuscation that the novelty of the material receives through time and that is therefore testimony of the elapsed time, is not only advisable but unquestionably obliged.

When talking about patina and the debate generated on its respect or elimination, it is necessary to mention the "radical" cleanings carried out at the National Gallery, a polemic that was called the 'cleaning controversy' (1946-1968) and in which restorers, conservators and historians, including Cesare Brandi, the French René Huyghe and the English Ernst Gombrich (Hernández, 1999: 170) participated.

In this discussion, Brandi argued that patina should not be conserved for a reason of taste or opinion, but its conservation should be based on a solid theoretical basis. The defenders of extreme cleanings blamed the concept of patina to be a product of romanticism. But it really goes back to much earlier periods, since it was a term coined in 1961 by Baldinucci:³¹ "Word used by painters, and also called skin, and it is that universal darkness that time makes appear on paintings, which also sometimes favors them"³² (Baldinucci, 1988: 89). For Brandi, the respect for the patina implied respect for the cleaning of all the constituent materials of the work of art, thus opposing the more "interventionist" position of the Anglo-Saxon world; but this is not merely a matter of aesthetics, but rather of the historical conception of the work.

As for works of contemporary art that do not accept the passage of time, as Francesca Valentini says, patina is a concept that must be discussed on a case by case basis and, in fact, must be subordinated to the pre-eminence of the aesthetic case above the historical case (perhaps in a way to cling to a theoretical ambiguity in which many types of interpretations fit).

Brandi says, the aesthetic instance should prevail over the historical instance. A work of absolute white, if it becomes yellow, no longer expresses its aesthetic instance. One may discuss whether to keep the work's "patina", its historical instance or to remove it, respecting the artist's intention for the work to be achromatic (its aesthetic instance). For Brandi the various "patinas" should be discussed case by case (Valentini, 2008: 77).

Likewise, Brandi also affirmed that the historical case could not be underestimated, since between the time of creation and the time of perception there is an intermediate period that will be constituted by so many historical presents that are already past, which Brandi called *traces* (Brandi 2005: 49). It can be said that there is a serious conflict with the concept of patina

³⁰ Original quotation: "Uno de los problemas principales que origina la necesidad de intervenir en las obras de arte es el efecto del paso del tiempo sobre ellas. Este fenómeno que afecta por igual no sólo a los cuadros, las esculturas, los edificios, sino también al resto de los bienes culturales, se manifiesta de un modo especial en la superficie de los objetos y recibe el nombre de pátina".

³¹ Filippo Baldinucci (1624-1697), Florentine historian and biographer widely known in the Baroque period.

³² Original quotation: "Voce usata da' Pittori, e doconla altrimenti pelle, ed è quella vniuersale scurità che il tempo fa apparire sopra le pitture, che anche taluolta le fauorisce".

in modern art, and on whether it has the right or not to age and present traces of the passage of time. In fact, there are conflicting opinions on this subject. "Patina in contemporary art is one of the topics that generates more controversial attitudes and opinions, especially in comparison with the meaning and interpretation that the most traditional art sector performs" (Hiip, 2008: 155).

Patina is attributed immaterial values, beyond the physical traces that time imprints on the works. These physical changes in the material imply an intangible dimension of historicity, science and emotional values. As defined by Paul Philippot, patina "is not physical or chemical, but is a *critical concept*" (Philippot, 2002: 12).

In the current artistic scene, we can observe how what is considered as something positive in ancient art, is inadmissible in contemporary art since the traces of time on the work in many cases disturb its perception. Contemporary art is expected to be shown "as something new," the product of our contemporaneity. We do not want to perceive the passage of time through patina, because the value that prevails in contemporary art is the value of novelty.

One must really understand Brandi's theory and thinking in relation to its historical context, since in 1940 it did not make sense to talk about the interactivity of art or the experiential function, so Brandi considered art in terms that remain marginal to these concepts. Brandi, in previously mentioned writings such as *Segno and imagine* (1960) and other later ones like *Teoria generale della critica* (1974), did not accept the value of art as a conceptual language; therefore it would be an anachronism to try to provide an answer with Brandi's theory to the problems that arose decades later, in today's art, given that the criteria it poses respond to the thought of a period, and to the art developed at that time, but do not fit the characteristics of today's art. In fact, the Italian theorist did not talk about cultural heritage (as a cultural and heritage assets), but he talked about works of art.

Conclusions

Restoration is a cultural act, and as such it is closely linked to the historical moment in which it is developed, as well as to the cultural specificities of the society that produces it. Therefore, the concept of restoration of Cesare Brandi and its validity in the application to contemporary art can be somewhat anachronistic *a priori*, but we can see from a broader perspective how his theory of restoration proposed methodological parameters based on a critical attitude towards the work of art, which are perfectly applicable to contemporary art.

As previously stated, according to the idealistic theories beginning with Benedetto Croce and continuing with Cesare Brandi, the work of art was identified with the finished physical object. Its authenticity resided in the material that composed it because it linked us to a previous era. Traditionally there has been an amount of fetishism with regard to material that was valued as something almost sacred, which could not be altered because the authenticity of the work of art resided in it; it was considered original because it was unique and exclusive. However nowadays this does not make sense; art has become intangible, it is generated in technological contexts and its value has completely changed. It has ceased to be physical to become an image, sensations and experiences. The value of history can no longer be perceived in an object that has not been manufactured by the hand of the artist, but on the contrary it has been created from a design, generated by software, with exact measurements and colors, which are reproduced in a mechanized or serial manner. The elements that compose the artistic work have often been acquired in a market, or have been produced industrially, losing the "aura" of the work. The creative gesture of the artist no longer intervenes in the process of making the work of art. Therefore, what prevents us from reproducing, manufacturing or printing it again?

The Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson already spoke of how art was generated in the artist's mind and was not just a result (Pareyson, 1954). In artistic creations that are no longer "autographed," authenticity no longer resides in the original material, but in the idea, in the intention with which it was created. In the same way that the Italian theorist Cesare Brandi defended in his writings regarding the importance of the conservation of the original material in order to preserve the historical and cultural values of a society, we must also understand how, in his day, the German historian and restorer Heinz Althöfer³³ drew attention to the inadequacy of some of these guidelines when applied to the contemporary art that was being produced in his closest environment. He observed how the situation had culturally suffered extraordinary changes in the artistic panorama during the postwar period in Germany, where innovative artistic movements arose, producing a rupture with the very concept of art, challenging the value of matter and highlighting the ephemeral, transitory and fleeting nature of a society that had been decimated by two great World Wars. But it is very interesting how he highlighted the importance of the Siense theorist in giving priority to the theoretical basis on the practical execution of the profession. Nowadays, artistic intention becomes the fundamental value to be preserved in the restoration of contemporary art, above material or image, a concept on which the theoretical reflections of numerous theorists of restoration, such as Antonio Rava in Italy, Hiltrud Schinzel in Germany, Iwona Szmelzer in Poland, or IJsbrand Hummelen in Holland will be based (Santabárbara, 2019).

In conclusion, we can affirm that the exhaustive reading of Cesare Brandi's texts for the understanding and knowledge of his thinking would lead us to understand why Brandi's theory is not a dogmatic doctrine, but a methodological and critical line of thought that can be adapted to the changes produced in contemporary art; this includes a need to modify terms like material and image to apply to contemporary art, and to identify the meaning of "material" (which in the Brandian theory was defined as the support of the image) with the artistic intention or the conceptual message, going beyond the purely physical. In the words of the Italian architect Riccardo Dalla Negra: "the theory of Cesare Brandi is not an ideological doctrine that imposes a concrete mode of action, but would it be comparable to the tracks of a train, where there is a space between both lines to move and walk."³⁴

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³³ Heinz Althöfer (1925-2018), restorer and art historian, born in 1925, in Niederaden, near Dortmund. Studied Art history and restoration in Bonn, Munich, Basel and Rome (in the Instituto Centrale del Restauro). He's Ph.D dissertation was under supervision of Hans Sedlmayr at the University of Munich and was invited professor of several Germany and abroad universities. Professor of the University of Dusseldorf and Wuppertal. He has been lecturer at different German and international universities. His more than fifty publications include *Scientific Nature, Theory and History of Restoration of Contemporary Art*. In 2006, Althöfer presented the conference "The Theory of Cesare Brandi and Modern Art (Althöfer and Behrmann-Frigeri, 2007: 51-54).

³⁴ Words from a conversation held between professors Riccardo Dalla Negra and Ascensión Hernández in December 2013 in Rome.

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