

# ***Authorship, authenticity and originality reformulated, and their application in contemporary multiple and organic installations***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Based on the review of writings by theorists and conservators, we propose a reformulation of the concepts of *authorship*, *authenticity* and *originality*, promoting the expansion of meanings and applicable scopes in contemporary art installations, even in those made with organic objects or easily replaceable materials. In such situations, how should we act as conservators in cases where the important thing is the transmission of meaning, not the materiality of the object?

## **KEYWORDS**

authorship; authenticity; originality; contemporary art conservation; theory; installations

## INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY ART INSTALLATIONS

**A**rt installations are somewhat different from the traditional concept of art, where the artistic object is one “that can be moved, bought, sold, given away, [that] possesses a presence and [a] well-defined material entity and is destined for contemplation” (Bozal, 1989, p. 32). The defined object contemplates that its mastery becomes present through the harmonic transformation of the properties of matter, in perfect relation to the expressed idea and in special union with the social and cultural context of which it is a product. Although it would seem that every object considered to be artistic should have these characteristics to be so, nothing could be further from the definition that Marcel Duchamp proposed at the beginning of the last century and, consequently, the artistic creations that succeeded him.

Artistic objects produced by post-war artists sought to detach themselves from the values of the objectual, promoting technological innovation and the sublimation of matter to the actual concept itself. These creations encourage an engagement with the spectator in a different, intuitive, personal, intangible way, evoking trauma or shock. The avant-gardes and movements of the 20th century, especially those created from the 1970s onwards, therefore focused less on the material and more on the conceptual. For Arthur Danto, conceptual art shows that “a palpable visual object is not required for something to be a work of art” (1997, p. 11), moving away from the sensible experience towards the search for the activation of thought. This results in the creation of objects that are the result of a different way of doing things, emphasizing the procedural and the conceptual, detached from a unique materiality, freeing them and transforming them into non-unique, repeatable and perhaps even immortal objects.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the artist, by prioritizing technological experimentation and creative innovation, ceases to be the maker of closed and unique works and instead gives way to works that employ a variety of techniques, materials—the human body and its movements included—and materials—be them pure or mixed, the chemically incompatible, altered or degraded—used with an assigned intention and as a product of a constant tentative and provocative process. The product of this experimentation tends to be incomplete

<sup>1</sup> Objects are freed from their material and temporal envelope. By having the possibility of creating them over and over again, a perpetual existence is suggested, thus making them immortal.

works<sup>2</sup> dependent on the interaction of the observer; they cease to be final because they adapt to exhibition spaces, the theme and the context in which they are presented. They cease to be unique because they reproduce, they multiply, and they have the capacity to exist independently of the material, hence they can be shown in different places at the same time.

Returning to Danto, it means that, in contemporary creations, insofar as appearances were important, anything could be a work of art (1997, p. 11); if anything created can be designated a work of art, a support system is required to define and understand it. This support is usually provided by philosophical theory, as it helps in understanding the meaning of the created object, the ideas that gave rise to its conception, as well as the historical moment reflected through it. The support of art through philosophy has proved to be vital for the conceptual analysis of objects that at first glance might seem common or indiscernible between them and an artistic object. However, similar objects are far from being so, sometimes because of the context in which they were created, because of the originator of the idea or because of “being about something and embodying its meaning” (Danto, 2005, p. 33). It is fundamental to take up these ideas and adhere to the theory in order to understand them.

To introduce the subject, I will take up the case proposed by Arthur Danto (2005) about the three *Brillo* boxes (Figure 1): the first one made by the industrial designer James Harvey (1961) for the company Brillo, the second one exhibited by the artist Andy Warhol (1964) and the third one reproduced by the American artist Mike Bidlo (1991). The three boxes have the same design and dimensions, and seem indiscernible at a glance, but there is a difference in the temporality of creation, the objectives and intentions behind each of them. They are very similar, almost identical, but they are not so, since they were not created with the same intentions, ideas, functions, layouts, productions or places of consumption. The first box (Harvey, 1961) was made for commercial purposes, where the packaging made reference to cleanliness, modernity and patriotism (the national colors of the United States of red, blue and white, are the same colors used in the packaging). The second (Warhol, 1964) highlights the popular culture defended by Warhol against the elitist culture promulgated by American abstract expressionism

<sup>2</sup> Incomplete or open works, according to Eco, since their function, intention or meaning are not closed. They need users to complete and activate them. The artist deploys a partial bridge that the audience must complete to achieve communication between them both (Eco, 1998, p. 15).

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FIGURE 1. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box*, 1964. Polymeric paint, screen printing on wood. Dimensions: 43.3 x 43.2 x 36.5 cm (Photo: The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; source: Founding Collection [D.R. © ANDYWARHOL/ARS/SOMAAP/México/2021]).



of which only the elite participated. The third (Bidlo, 1991) exemplifies, with a recognized object, the much heralded end of art: this object previously produced industrially had to be reproduced by hand by Bidlo.

These three boxes, as Danto explains, help us to understand that it is irrelevant if we had in front of us any one of these three boxes and we could not discern which is Warhol's, Harvey's or Bidlo's; all three are works that should be treated in the same way. However, "that which makes something a work of art is not something that the eye can easily grasp, it is very much a question of what it means" (Danto, 2005, p. 39). An artistic object is the sum of its meanings, artistic intentions, aesthetic motivations, as well as of the viewer's response; it depends on all of this in order for it to exist. Contemporary artistic works are, to a great extent, what they mean, what they represent, and not necessarily their materiality, since this is chosen to serve as the conductor and transmitter.

Even just in this example that Danto discusses at length, we can see the questioning of some of the grounds on which the restoration of art objects depends. Sometimes, in order to start the restoration of an object, it is necessary to define its importance with respect to its time of creation, the author, the role the object

plays within a community or in the overall understanding of art in our century, the importance of its materials, all of which help the restorer to evaluate the procedure and the optimal way in which to proceed. Now, if in contemporary artistic conceptual creations, the transmission of meanings is what matters and not the materiality of the object, we must ponder other points on which to rely on when making decisions regarding their conservation and restoration. Hence, this paper proposes a reformulation of concepts from different theoretical positions and outlines approaches towards non-unique and performative objects,<sup>3</sup> promoting the concept of *authorship* as one of the central axes. I will start from its definition, function and obligations towards the piece in order to understand the ties that link them, and which extend to make them inheritable to serial objects, as will be discussed below.

### REFLECTIONS ON AUTHORSHIP

Authorship in the 20th century was fundamental in the transformation of art and, currently, it can be a decisive factor in the purchase and sale of works, by adding a certain value, even if the artist did not physically or manually touch them. Authorship goes beyond just autographing a piece of work; with these contemporary creations, the concept of art as we know it starts to become strained and blurred and, being one of the most transformed in recent decades, this assignment has served to make the world of art even more controversial. Such is the case of the work *Comedian* (2019) by Maurizio Cattelan (Figure 2), a banana stuck with gray tape to the wall in the Perrotin Gallery at Art Basel Miami Beach 2019, valued at \$120,000.00 USD, marking the artist's long-awaited return to art fairs after many years of absence.

The word *author* could be defined in many ways, especially if we are talking about the field of art, however, the Diccionario de la Lengua Española of the Real Academia Española (DLE-RAE for its acronyms in Spanish) promotes several meanings, among them, the "person who is the cause of something, who invents something" (DLE, 2021). These definitions are so general that we could be in front of the author of an artistic work or of an invention without finding any difference between them whatsoever.

<sup>3</sup> Performing installations, according to Muñoz-Viñas, are those works that have a propensity for variability since they are remade or renewed in each exhibition, and that are also assigned some type of specific action to perform. Some examples of performative works could be cases of ephemeral, processual installations like *Eat Art* or *Time-Based Media* (Muñoz, 2010, p. 11).

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FIGURE 2. Maurizio Cattelan. *Comedian*, 2019. Banana, duct tape. Dimensions: variable. From Perrotin at Art Basel Miami Beach Perrotin Gallery, 2019 (Photo credit: Sarah Cascone, December 17, 2019; source: ArtNet News on Perrotin Gallery at Art Basel Miami Beach, United States of America [D.R.© MAURIZIO CATTELAN/ SIAE/SOMAAP/ México/2021]).



Now, if the author is the cause of something, let us take the example of the work *Like a Tzompantli* (2015) (Figure 3) by Minerva Cuevas, in the temporary exhibition *Feast and Famine*<sup>4</sup> at kurimanzutto Gallery, an installation that presents —either in display cases or in individual wrappings— multiple chocolate ears replicating human ones, in which the use of real cocoa native to the Xoconusco region of Chiapas, by the company Chocolate Rx Brujo, is featured. Minerva Cuevas was not in charge of collecting the beans, processing the cocoa, emptying the chocolate or packaging, which makes us question where the authorship lies since Cuevas did not transform the raw material. To determine this, we will first take up several ideas of thinkers who contrast the very concept of authorship.

In *What is an Author?* (1998), Michel Foucault proposes several interrogations to help address the meaning of the author in contemporary society. Firstly, he considers it essential to understand how the idea of an author arises, what is its function and its relation to authenticity and attribution in a culture such as ours. For Foucault, the idea of the author arose in the Middle Ages, where social activities were grouped according to the type of work or the type of material that was being produced; the guilds of sculptors, guilders, and painters, among others, were well known. In the search to stand out from the rest, a certain group began to seek out specialization and uncommon or original forms in order to create details

<sup>4</sup> This temporary exhibition by Minerva Cuevas was presented from September 22 through October 24, 2015, in Mexico City. The ears reference the pre-Hispanic practice of using parts of the body as a unit of measurement, as well as early anthropological efforts to compare races and cultures by measuring and documenting the human body. The symbolism of the severed ear also recalls the methods of social repression, torture and control that have historically been used throughout the world (de Andrade, 2015, par. 4).

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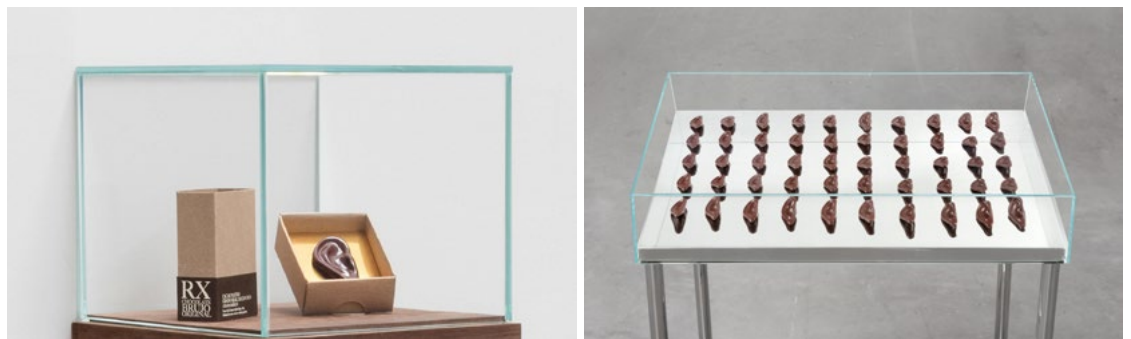


FIGURE 3. Minerva Cuevas, *Like a Tzompantli*, 2015. Chocolate ears in showcase and polycarbonate molds. Dimensions: 94 x 91.5 x 62 cm approx. Installed. Installation view: *Feast and Famine* at kurimanzutto Mexico City/New York (Photo: Omar Luis Olguín, 2015; courtesy: of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City/New York).

that would demonstrate the craftsmanship or technique of the individual. They decided to further emphasize the difference between them and other would be creators by giving their creations a stamp of origin, marking them or inscribing them with the name of the person who devised them (Foucault, 1998, pp. 205-209).

Foucault explains that, when the figure of the author was created, its functions were thus established, among them, that of referring to someone, describing existence, assigning, or linking ideas to a name. It also had the function of grouping a number of works that may be different from each other, but which are contained and yet at the same time differentiated from others. These works are linked implying relations of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanations, authentication or a common use (1998, pp. 206-207).

In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society. It implies that an individual in a certain place and time succeeds in completing a project that can be legitimately attributed to them (Foucault, 1998, p. 213). Therefore, authorship can also be understood as the means for classification, thus being employed as a system that is intended not only to identify the person behind the creation but also the discourse or the referential framework of the work to be received and interpreted. Authorship as a system addresses not only who we are talking about but also the discourse or content of a work, in a way that leads to its identification or definition within a grouping of similar objects. This is important since part of this interpretation can be provided by other works of an artist or by the critical discourse that surrounds them (Buskirk, 2003, pp. 19-21). Although the classification according to style has been of great assistance to authors of past centuries, nowadays it is no

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longer viable, since there are artists who can be associated with more than one particular technique, resource, theme, selection of materials, as well as their artistic intentions linked to those objects.

Prior to the 1960s, in the processes of artistic production it was understood that “the unity between form and content in the process of creation, and decisions about representation, were inseparable from the act of making the work” (Buskirk, 2003, p. 13). This made artistic works a kind of inseparable form-content duo, where the result of the material transformation was therefore the binding between the author to the works themselves. However, nowadays there can be the intellectual author and the material creator; there may even be gaps in time between the conception of the idea and its production, or even adjustments between one production and the other according to demand. Buskirk (2003, pp. 19-23) raises the question of the extent to which the author can change the status of a simple object to a work of art without physically modifying it. So, if the manufacturing was not done by the same person who conceptualized it, how can a work be assigned to an author?

Returning to the example of *Comedian* (2019) (Figure 2), how can we link Cattelan with a banana taped to the wall? There are different answers to this question. Since the Dada movement, at the beginning of the 20th century, authors and critics have asked themselves precisely these questions, questioning the purpose of art and stressing that the artistic intention lies beyond material transformation, especially if the objects selected are the ideal ones to convey the designs, intentions and concepts to be communicated.

In works that are not directly fabricated by the hand of the artist, that are conceptually conceived by them but where the workmanship is entrusted to someone else (a technician, assistant, intern or even nature), or where the work is the product of industrial fabrication that merely follows instruction or through the act of selecting an already elaborated object (like Duchamp’s ready-made works or Kosuth’s chairs) (Figure 4), the authorship is not in the link given by the material transformation that generates the work of art. Rather, it is now fixed in the idea itself. It is suggested that the author is no longer only the one who modifies or transforms the material and then signs it; authorship is also present in the very act of the designation and instruction of what is and what will be an artistic object, because creation itself begins in the creative process, in the idea and the conception of the work itself.

These aforementioned changes in authorship are fundamental, since such actions will be of utmost importance. The concept of



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FIGURE 4. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of “chair”. Chair dimensions: 82 x 37.8 x 53 cm, photographic panel 91.5 x 61.1 cm, text panel 61 x 76.2 cm (Photo: Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund, 2004; courtesy: The Museum of Modern Art, New York [D.R.©JOSEPH KOSUTH/ARS/SOMAAP/México/2021]).



authorship is broadened as it is modified in so much as now, the link between creator and work is understood as “a particular set of interests, selections, or processes where the final results are closer to being linked conceptually than stylistically” (Buskirk, 2003, p. 89). Hence, a contemporary artistic production can exist free of matter, only in concept, and may never depend just on matter that at some point condemns it to perish. Thus, authorship can be understood as “the expression that the author has over the work has moral rights, even when they are not the ones who physically transform it materially. Yet still, it is understood that the author is the one who is behind all the administration and delegation of the workmanship” (Buskirk, 2003, p. 13). That is to say, the presence of the author and the decision of whether or not to create the work is enough to make it the most important part in the attribution of authorship to the concept-work.

Therefore, the authorship of contemporary work corresponds to the person(s) who conclude(s) an idea, put(s) it forward, and who can transform it into matter or has/have the power to directly induce others into executing it. They can cooperate in the execution, but they require a group of people without whom it could not be executed. An author is one who, by means of designation, is able to change the meaning of a copied or discovered object. Taking into account these expanded definitions of authorship, we can conclude that there are actions and functions that link an author with their artistic work, even protecting and accompanying them for as long as the work exists (in idea or in matter).

Returning to the case of *Like a Tzompantli* (2015), Minerva Cuevas is the one who conceptualizes the work, who idealizes the

manufacture of the ears and who is responsible for the execution of the materialization and production of all the chocolates used for the exhibition, to demonstrate her intentions and ideas for this exhibition, which links the marked symbolism of cocoa as currency, its multiple interpretations in the pre-Hispanic world and its relationship with cannibalism. Therefore, each ear presented, be it as a collective set or as an individually packaged item, are and forever will be, the work of Cuevas, even if there is a whole team of collaborators and volunteers who help transform the cocoa into chocolate. In this case, Cuevas's authorship is not only linked to the production process of chocolates, which transforms them into artistic objects within a gallery and in doing so brings them to life, but also in assigning them particular functions and intentions of permanence/impermanence, destiny/luck, as well as everything related to their sale and purchase, and even, the delimitation of their life or their transformation into immortal objects.

### **SOME VARIANTS ON AUTHENTICITY AND HOW TO APPLY THEM TO CONTEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS**

If we start from the definition of *authenticity*<sup>5</sup> that refers to it as the part of the process linked to creation, being that which really comes from the author to whom it is attributed, then for an artistic object to be considered authentic, it is necessary that the chain linking it to its author is never broken, neither by the intervention of others' hand, nor by the confusion, intentional or not, regarding the identity of its author. Duchamp had already been mentioned for being considered a pioneer in the questioning of the authenticity of an artistic object, since the ready-made is the first artistic object that, despite having been signed by an artist, was not really created by them, yet does not constitute a forgery—since it is presented as an industrially produced object (Heinich, 2010, par. 24). The rejection of the urinal by the jury of the Salon des Indépendants in 1917 highlights the radically transgressive nature of such a paradoxical operation, which manifests itself in the denial of the major criterion of authenticity: the certainty of a link between the object and its origin, in this case, its author.

Authenticity is also the link that ties the originality of the ideas and materials selected to its author. In general, authenticity has been considered as the evidence that verifies or endorses that the

<sup>5</sup> It comes from the Greek verb *αὐθεντικός* (*authentikós*), and means to have authority, to govern someone, and from the noun *authéntés*, the one who works for themselves, is author or executor (DLE, 2021).

use of materials or the technique of workmanship of a certain author is true. This involves the identification of raw materials, the examination of tool marks and other aspects of construction and, when possible, the use of scientific dating techniques (Pye, 2001, p. 59). Laurenson mentions that, for traditional objects, “authenticity accepts degrees; at one end of the spectrum, questions of authenticity can be absolute, *this metal is gold*; and at the other end of the spectrum, something could be classified as *an authentic instance of X because it satisfies the minimum criteria for membership into the classification of X*” (2006, p. 4). Authenticity can, therefore, be seen as scientific probative evidence that something is genuine according to what it claims to be, be it the context, the material, or the technique used.

Now, judgments on authenticity are based on evidence, however, they can be modulated by other subjective factors that include the knowledge, memories, beliefs or cultural values of the evaluator. Authenticity judgments may vary, not only between individuals, but also over time (Castriota, 2019, p. 22). Authenticity relates to forgery and attempts to pass off as deception, a work of art attributed to a person, time, or culture (Figure 5). These notions of authenticity and forgery are particularly relevant to the world of “unique objects that contain evidence causally linking the object to the hand of the author. Authentic objects provide us with a direct link to a particular past and, in this sense, authentic means ‘*not a forgery*’” (Laurenson, 2006, p. 9), where the counterfeit is understood as the contradiction of the authentic; where the truth is not told regarding its origin, context or authorship.

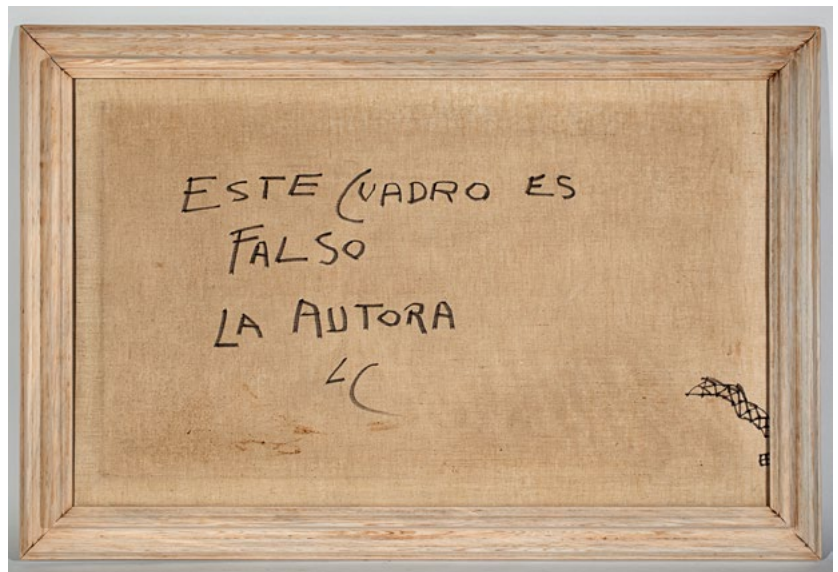
For Nelson Goodman, there is a classification of the arts into the falsifiable and the non-counterfeitable due to their autographic and allographic characteristics. He defines *autographic arts* as those that are concrete, such as paintings and sculptures, while *allographic arts* are intangible, such as musical or theatrical works that require a performance (Goodman, 1976, cited by Laurenson, 2006, p. 4). Laurenson mentions that for Goodman “authenticity operating in the traditional conceptual framework of conservation is appropriate for a situation in which the objects of conservation are the autographic arts, but inappropriate for works that are not” (2006, p. 4).

To cite an example, Mexican artist Adriana Lara’s installation *Banana Peel*, presented in 2008 at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts (UMFA) as part of the temporary exhibition *The generational: Younger than Jesus*, is a work that involves a museum custodian who is tasked with eating a banana every morning and throwing the peel somewhere that is visible in the exhibition hall. Each day

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FIGURE 5. Gabriel de la Mora, L.C., from the series *Originalmentefalso* (*Originallyfalse*), 2011. Ink on canvas on the back of the fake Leonora Carrington. Signed backwards and dated backwards. Dimensions: 61.595 x 91.4908 x 3.7846 cm (Photo: Studio of Gabriel de la Mora, 201; courtesy: of the artist and Proyectos Monclova).



the peel changes shape and location, yet it remains Adriana Lara's signature. *Banana peel*, therefore, exemplifies that one cannot apply the concept of authenticity to all kinds of artistic creations, which for Laurensen would mean that "if the ontological frame focuses on the material, so will the notion of authenticity. If the ontological framework changes, then we expect a similar shift in our concepts of authenticity, change, and loss" (2006, p. 4). Changing the ontological framework implies that the dependence between the type of artistic object and the authenticity that accompanies it, manifests itself in other ways and is not necessarily linked, in this case, to its material constitution.

Therefore, in this case, the concept of authenticity is not found in the material transformation that links it with the author, nor with its uniqueness, but rather it is expanded, allowing simple objects to be authentic as long as they are given a new meaning and functions to fulfill in a given time and space. Thus, it is possible that works such as *Banana Peel* are considered artistic installations even though they are not the product of the artist's direct transformation of material—they could have been bought, sown or harvested—and that they are still considered authentic in their auratic and reproducible capacity. Therefore, the physical hand of the artist is not necessary for an object to be considered art, and ways have been found to keep authorship and authenticity under control through designations, signatures, certificates or documentation of artist-authorized versions and editions.

On the other hand, authenticity does not lie in individual parts but in the functioning of the whole, as long as they have the capacity to convey the ideas and meanings for which they were created

(Laurenson, 2006, p. 16). Following this derivation of the authentic, the replacement of deteriorated original materials with new or similar ones could be what is necessary and perhaps indispensable, to preserve the authenticity of a work, not without first considering the “idea it embodies through an analysis of the meanings and values in accordance with the intentions of its creator” (Jadzinska, 2012, p. 94). Hence, induced change and substitutions are requirements for preserving authenticity, since in contemporary installations such as *Banana Peel*, sense is only found in the fulfillment or realization of changes or substitutions that are necessary in order for the function and transmission of meaning to be produced without interruption. It is worth mentioning that these changes or substitutions in the works must be registered, as well as the aspects related to what makes them unique, so that it is an installation approved by the artist and, for this reason, remains authentic.

By expanding the meaning of authenticity so that it may be applied to contemporary installations, it can be concluded that authenticity is relevant as much in form as it is in technique, in the relationship with the author, in its reproducibility or constant substitution of its parts or its material totality, as long as it continues with the transmission of concepts, functions, intentions or meanings for which it was originally created. Furthermore, as Jadzinska (2012) mentions, understanding the forms or ways of being in this proposal of authenticity that is to be applied to different contemporary art installations will influence our work as conservators, and therefore the way in which we preserve and carry out interventions of them.

### THE FORMS OF ORIGINALITY IN CONTEMPORARY WORKS

Following from this, if authorship and authenticity are concepts that are intimately linked to each other, not only to understand the work itself but also to devise our intervention as conservators, we should also add the concept of *originality* for a complete understanding of these objects of contemporary creation.

After the experimentation and technical and conceptual innovation of the artistic endeavor proposed in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century by various European artistic avant-gardes, it could seem difficult to comprehend the meaning of originality when we talk about contemporary artistic creations. Therefore, this paper proposes a departure from the definitions of the original as applied to traditional artistic creations and a discussion on the aspects that constitute it, and how this can be coupled to changes in the art world, specifically in those found in multiple and organic installations.

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Starting with the definition of the concept itself, the DLE defines *originality* as that which “refers to the origin of something, whether it be its new or unusual character or the particularities of its first version” (DLE, 2021). If we apply this definition to a work of art, it could be said that it is original when it meets any of the following requirements:

- 1) It is novel in some way.
- 2) It is the first model.
- 3) It is reproducible; copies are made from it.
- 4) It is unprecedented, distinguishing it from copies, forgeries and other derivative works.
- 5) Its origin, understood as authorship, is authentic.

The first criterion on originality is the most widely used because it is the one considered to be the basis for the concept. If a work of art is original, in principle, it is because it arises from an idea that has not been previously conceived, that has the character of novelty and that results from the inventiveness of the author (DLE, 2014). That two people can develop the same idea independently and reach the same conclusion can occur, but if this happens it implies that there are some variables, either in form, sense or perhaps in operation.

Originality can also be used to designate, in a work of art—whether it is a material, conceptual, procedural, sonorous or ephemeral object—the first support chosen by the author, at the moment when the work is finished in concept but is still unpublished. One of the postulates of Sol LeWitt’s Conceptual Art puts the concept of originality in tension since, if “ideas in themselves can be works of art” (LeWitt, 1967, p. 79), then any materialization of them is ephemeral, so the concern from the point of view of material conservation would be incorrect (Weyer, 2010, p. 26). Hence, it is questioned whether the first materialization or model is the one that preserves the original character in a work, even if it is only the idea. The originality, therefore, does not depend on the support itself, but on the beginning, on how the work is born or created.

The third criteria by which an artistic object can be considered original depends on its ability to be reproduced, copied or duplicated. In fact, original is a term used to designate something reproducible or that has served as a model to make copies of which other equal or similar ones are obtained (DLE, 2014). For example, if we think of a photographic negative, one can make an indeterminate number of prints, yet there is no question of which is the

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authentic one, which one is the original and which one is a copy, even when the photographers themselves are the ones making the prints. Walter Benjamin goes even deeper by proposing the term *multiple original*, which he uses to designate objects created alike from the same or similar source that have the possibility of reproducibility (Benjamin, 1936, cited by Krauss, 1981, p. 168), or in such techniques as printing, engraving, photography and sculpture conceived with the intention of obtaining a determined number or series of copies in which the artistic intention is transmitted to all equally and in which it does not matter which is the first or the last to be made.

During the Third International Congress of Artists held in Vienna in the 1960s, a definition of what was original was reached, which argued that prints could only be original if the artist had engraved the plate, cut the wood, worked on the stone or any other material; that is, if the artist's hand could be proved. However, this same argument was overcome when, in Warhol's *The Factory* (1962), he produced silkscreens that repeated the same motif several times, were produced mechanically by an artistic supervisor and, as it is known, were signed —some of them— by his mother. In these silk-screen prints, the artist's hand in the process of creation, supervision and even the signature, are left out. These creations are multiple copies without an original which, in spite of being mechanical, have an original authorship, technique, and even, form of participation (Buskirk, 2003, pp. 63-77). The concept of originality in *The Factory's* productions is reflected in the materials and technique of an artist according to an era or context, which “[can] guarantee the veracity of a work as a historical document or proof of its true origin” (Weyer, 2010, p. 26), which makes them multiple works and original to their context.

When the materials or techniques used by an artist derive from mass production methods, the art market demands that this inherent multiplicity be adjusted to conventions, to productions limited by the author,<sup>6</sup> which assures the buyers that they are in front of an original, separating it from the rest of the objects produced in the same series (Buskirk, 2003, p. 63). The originality that can emanate from them does not depend on the physical aspect, but on the unexpected act or gesture, through which they are detached

<sup>6</sup> Cattelan, together with the Perrotin gallery, decided to make three editions of *Comedian* (2019); the first one was eaten during the first day of exhibition by the artist David Datuna alleging that he was making a performance called “hungry artist”. This version was replaced and the next day it was withdrawn of the fair due to the expectation and chaos created. Two editions were sold to private collectors. The third is expected to be acquired by a museum (Pes, December 8, 2019).

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FIGURE 6. Sandy Skoglund, *The Cocktail Party*, 1992. Installation with found objects, Cheez Doodles, and paint. Dimensions: variable. Collection McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas (Photo: Frank Coronado; courtesy: The McNay Museum, Texas, 2021).



For this reason and because of the great demand of collectors, there is increasing controversy about how art that includes doubts about its originality, uniqueness, artistic capabilities or longevity, has been part of a system of collecting and valuation based on these qualities. Originality is linked to the problem of authenticity from the perspective of collectionism in the art market, especially if additionally we consider that the material with which a certain work was made is necessary for it to be considered original. As has been



mentioned, in contemporary multiple and organic art installations, the material can be of little relevance as long as the intentions imposed on them are fulfilled, or as long as they continue to transmit the designated ideas. It could be said that there are cases in which the substitution of the original material can be allowed as long as the idea remains true within it and that the artistic project exists in a way that this new version, the substitute, can be considered as original in its own right.

Let us consider for a moment the case of Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas* (1987 [2011]) (Figure 7), which was first created in 1987 and, "as one might imagine, must be recreated each time it is exhibited. It is an intense 12-hour process that gets tricky, with all the fat and sinew in the meat" (Donaldson, 2011, par. 2). This description is given by staff at the Walker Center's Conservation Department in 2011, when the work was (re)created for the temporary exhibition *Midnight Party*. *Vanitas* stands out because Sterbak alters our perceptions of a repulsive material such as raw meat; furthermore, this work seeks to articulate the ideas of fashion, body image, femininity, and ephemerality: "Her statement against fashion is an ironic commentary on the image of women as objects, literally as pieces of meat" (Vladimirova, 2012, p. 53). It is important to mention this because it endorses the fact that the meat must be fresh when confected, and salted to avoid fungus, but ready to start its decomposition process that drastically changes the appearance of the work (Donaldson, 2011, par. 5) provoking repulsive or even visceral feelings in the viewer. The meat in *Vanitas* (2011) is considered as original matter of the work as it helps to fulfill Sterbak's intention and there is no dispute that the work is original to the Canadian artist.

Now, let us consider when Lady Gaga appeared at the MTV *Video Music Awards* (2010) wearing a meat dress complete with matching handbag, boots and a hat. When the singer was asked who had dressed her for the event, she replied that she was wearing a creation by Franc Fernández and Nicola Formichetti (2010). My first reaction upon seeing Gaga's dress was to think that it alluded to *Vanitas* by Sterbak, however, after the award ceremony she commented that the intention of wearing this dress was, on the one hand, to defend animal rights, and on the other, to highlight the American militaries *don't-ask-dont-tell* policy (Alexander, 2011, par. 1). Therefore, the intentions are different, and the context also changes. Another point that separates these two dresses is the fact that Gaga's was treated by taxidermists, turning it into something resembling beef jerky and has consequently been exhibited

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FIGURE 7. Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh dress for Albino Anorexic*, 1987. Dimensions: variable (Courtesy: Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM), Centre Pompidou, Paris, Francia [©JANASTERBAK/2021]).



in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame since 2011. Sterbak's was discarded once the exhibition was over, and will be recreated again in its next exhibition.

Following the criteria of originality described at the beginning of this section, we can say that the novel idea of sewing a dress with beef is Sterbak's, since it was the first to be made back in 1987, and has become a reproducible and even copyable object; even if no direct reference has been made to *Vanitas*, it is a fact that Gaga's advisors knew of this work as well as of other works of Body Art, to which she pays tribute in her performances or videos.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the message and what is to be achieved with each of these pieces, Sterbak makes it clear that the process of decomposition is important in understanding the choice of this material over others and

<sup>7</sup> She presents herself with maggots on her face, as in Gina Pane's performative work *Death Control* (1974); in the video *Born this way*, she alters her face with lumps on her forehead as Orlan once did with her surgical interventions.

that it could be replicated to convey the same meaning in different museum spaces. In contrast, Fernández-Formichetti's (2010) differs: this one-off piece of work was preserved and is exhibited as singular evidence of this particular moment. Therefore, both are pieces made with fresh meat but do not, and will never have, the same artistic intention or meanings, so it can be concluded that the ideas conveyed by both dresses make them in many ways original in their own right.

## CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of a common object into a work of art lies within its given meaning and is not something that can be grasped by simple sight alone, which complicates the understanding, acceptance and transmission of meaning, especially if the public to which it is presented is unaware of this possibility. If anything can be called art, it is because it is found in the appropriate systems that serve to validate it —museums, galleries, critics or art markets. We may or may not agree, however, its designation does not depend on us.

Common objects presented as art show that what we can see is not necessarily all of what something is, but only a representation of what in reality is, a concept of an idea proposed by an author. They are objects selected to fulfill specific functions that represent unique ideas and intentions, i.e., they are expected to generate some emotion or reaction in the audience when witnessed —be it provocation, amazement, disgust, or otherwise.

It is common for several versions of the same object to exist and for more than one work to be presented in different spaces such as in museums, galleries or collections; and all of them be by the same author, be original and authentic.

The multiplicity of common objects present in contemporary installations questions the purpose of art and underlines that artistic intention is something beyond the transforming hand of the artist. The author has the power to create artistic objects simply by building them as an idea. There are installations where the artist is the one who has the idea and asks others to perform the execution, something which does not absolve them of their authorship. Being an author creates an inseparable bond between the work and the creator, which is maintained as long as the work continues to fulfill the role it was entrusted with.

The breadth of the concept of originality allows contemporary installations, such as those presented as examples in this text, to demonstrate that each one of them is original, as long as they con-

vey and do not falsify information about what they claim to be. The original can be unique in its subject matter, in the materials used or in its symbolism, in being the first of its kind or in being reproducible; as long as they are faithful to their context and to the intentions designated by their creators. The originality lies elsewhere, not necessarily in the material.

Authenticity can be the anchor that connects the context with the artist, the concept with the materiality and, therefore, serves as a basis on which to plan our intervention proposal. If we understand that authenticity is applicable to contemporary performative art installations —those that have allographic particularities, without a fixed and unique materiality—, then this will allow us to understand that the artistic intention is in the whole, in its meanings, thus allowing it to develop and operate adequately.

If every idea can be art, let us seek to take care of processes and that which allows it to be disseminated without modifying it, tying it down or defining it by a matter that it is not. If in these installations an undeniable particularity is detected, which makes it indispensable for the knowledge and evolution of the arts, then the intervention or non-intervention requires a deeper understanding of that particularity. That is, it is necessary to find those key elements that make it stand and establish their permanence; perhaps it turns out that its materiality is eligible for preservation, even if it is organic or replaceable.

Contemporary installations require a great deal of preliminary research regarding the artist's biography, techniques, context, intentions, values and meanings assigned, so they must be taken in collegiality: involving the collector, the author, the foundation and those related to the decision making process, in order to comply with the rights and obligations undertaken when acquiring the work and ensuring that they are not modified in the process.

The use of theoretical sources outside of our field of expertise strengthens the understanding of key concepts in our own profession. Artistic theory has a place in our practical work, let us not separate it. If we understand the origin and motivations in the breadth of the concepts of authorship, originality and authenticity, then we will also understand that the creation of artistic works has changed, that the values are embedded in aspects other than just the material. Our role as conservators in contemporary art creations is based on giving voice and argument to the intentions, symbolisms and meanings found in each of these works, regardless of whether it is performative, unique, ephemeral or processual. Art installations themselves challenge our work, but if we let them

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guide us, they can also show us the possible solutions for their conservation.

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