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## **DILEMMAS IN THE CONSERVATION-RESTORATION TREATMENT OF CONTEMPORARY ART PIECES MADE OF PAPER**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Die ideellen und materiellen Veränderungen in der Herstellung von Kunstwerken, die während des 20. Jahrhunderts stattgefunden haben, konfrontieren Restauratoren die sich der Aufgabe stellen, zeitgenössische Kunst zu konservieren mit neuen Herausforderungen. Unbeständigkeiten in der Stabilität neuer und unkonventioneller Materialien, in Kombination mit dem häufig essentiellen konzeptionellen Wert der verwendeten

Materialien, führen manchmal in dem Versuch, sowohl materielle als auch ideelle Aspekte zu erhalten, zu unangenehmen Kompromissen. Dieser Artikel diskutiert dieses Dilemma am Fallbeispiel zweier Kunstwerke, die kürzlich in der Abteilung für Restaurierung des Museums für Moderne Kunst in Ljubljana bearbeitet wurden: ein 'ready-made' Kunstwerk, 'Objekt iz kartona za jajca' (Objekt aus Eierkartons, 1967) von Milenko Matanovič, und 'Verbo Voco Visual' (1980), ein Kunstbuch des Westeast Kollektivs.

**Keywords:** Conservation-restoration, contemporary art, Milenko Matanovič, Westeast Ethics

### **Introduction**

A break from traditional ways of artistic expression that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought about changes in the selection of materials used in artistic creation. The incorporation of unorthodox materials into artworks has become commonplace and, in fact, the material itself is sometimes the element in which the most significant role of expression lies. Previously unused materials and the combination thereof with more traditional ways of creation result in artefacts whose stability is unpredictable.

By focusing on two artworks made of paper created in the previous century that we recently treated at the Conservation

Department of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, I will attempt to illustrate the dilemmas conservators of contemporary art are sometimes confronted with, and I will explore different approaches to conserving artworks composed of unconventional materials and the importance of considering the ideological aspects of their materiality, while striving to preserve a contemporary art piece in its most meaningful form.

### **Milenko Matanovič, *Object Made of Egg Cartons (Objekt iz kartona za jajca)***

Milenko Matanovič was a member of the artistic group OHO, which was active between

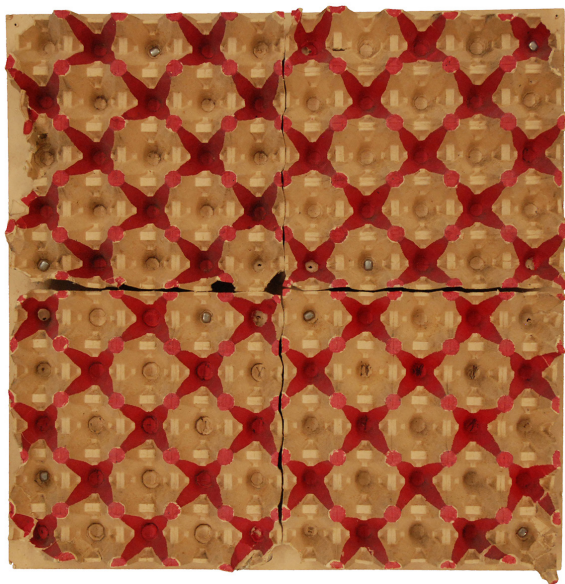


Fig. 1: Milenko Matanovič's *Object Made of Egg Cartons* before conservation

1966 and 1971. The group has been referred to by one of its members as a “constellation”,<sup>1</sup> indicating the fluid nature of collaborations, as well as its artistic agenda. It combined visual, literary and film artists with theorists, who joined to create pop articles, happenings, installations, and works of art of a similar nature, merging art with everyday life.<sup>2</sup> In March of 2018, Milenko Matanovič was preparing an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana,<sup>3</sup> with the goal of displaying art pieces that he had created during his time in the OHO collective, as well as later on as an independent artist and a member of different collectives, along with artwork created for the exhibition specifically.

One of the earlier works exhibited was a ready-made object called *Object Made of Egg Cartons*, created in 1967 (Fig. 1). In an interview about his work, Matanovič explained: “I had a special fondness for egg cartons. I liked their shape and felt that it



Fig. 2: *Object Made of Egg Cartons*. The paper pulp was crushed and missing mostly along the edges of the object

was a shame to throw them away after use. So I did a series of objects painting them in a variety of combinations, highlighting their geometry.”<sup>4</sup>

The object is composed of four square egg cartons (holding 25 eggs each), that the artist mounted side by side on a piece of cardboard using metal pegs and painted certain parts in a magenta hue, creating a distinctive geometrical pattern.

It had been stored in the museum’s repository but suffered significant damage in the years since its creation. Along with being very soiled, the fragile paper pulp was crushed and broken in several areas (Fig. 2). Especially at the edges, parts of it had detached and were stored alongside the artwork, while some of them were missing. Someone had already attempted to mend the damaged edge using white adhesive tape. Also visible was the abrasion of the pink paint, especially in the protruding areas.

Milenko Matanovič was highly involved in the installation of his upcoming exhibition, so we were very fortunate to have the artist essentially in-house at the time the conservation and restoration of the object were to take place. We were able to meet with the artist and discuss the possible solutions to the preservation and presentation of the object, which resulted in the agreement to attempt to restore *Object Made of Egg Cartons*.

1 K. GURSHTEIN, ‘The OHO Files: Afterword’, *ARTMargins*, 2011 <<https://artmargins.com/the-oho-files-afterword/>> [accessed 15 June 2019].

2 ‘Towards Zero Gravity’ <<http://zerogravity.mg-lj.si/slo/kozmiki/ohobio.htm>> [accessed 15 June 2019].

3 Exhibition *Waves: 50 years of Milenko Matanovič Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana, March 29<sup>th</sup> – June 24<sup>th</sup> 2018.

4 B. ŽEROVC, ‘The OHO Files: Interview with Milenko Matanovič’, in: *ARTMargins*, 2011 <<https://artmargins.com/the-oho-files-interview-with-milenko-matanovi/>> [accessed 15 June 2019].

After thorough documentation, the object was cleaned using dry cleaning methods. The paper was consolidated where necessary, focusing on areas that were mostly hidden from view in order to avoid any risk of hue changes to the paper pulp. Areas where the paper was ripped were reinforced using starch paste and small pieces of thin Japanese paper. The same method was used to reattach the pieces that had fallen off. Reconstruction of the missing areas proved to be the most challenging part of this restoration process. In 1967, the artist used what was at hand at the time – he was inspired by egg cartons, as they were produced somewhere in the former Yugoslavia in 1967. At first glance, egg cartons like this are still in use to this day, but it comes as no surprise that they are not exactly the same as they were more than 50 years ago. The slight differences between the egg cartons produced and used in our vicinity presently, and those available in 1967 present themselves mostly in the hue of the paper pulp and the shape of the protruding areas that would have been between the eggs. Replacing the missing areas of Matanovič's egg cartons with any that would only approximately resemble the shape and hue of the original, would unduly expose the added parts to the viewer's eye, disturb the geometrical nature of the object, and thus render the reconstruction unacceptable. The specifics of the shape and texture of the material would also make its replacement with any of the materials more commonly used in paper conservation difficult.

What seemed like the best option was to alter a new neutral coloured egg carton to a more appropriate shape and colour. Pieces of a white egg carton were painted using diluted watercolour, which softened the paper pulp, making it more malleable while tinting it appropriately at the same time. After reshaping, any excess material was cut away, and the prepared pieces were left to dry in their new form. They were then attached in the same manner the previously detached original pieces were – using starch

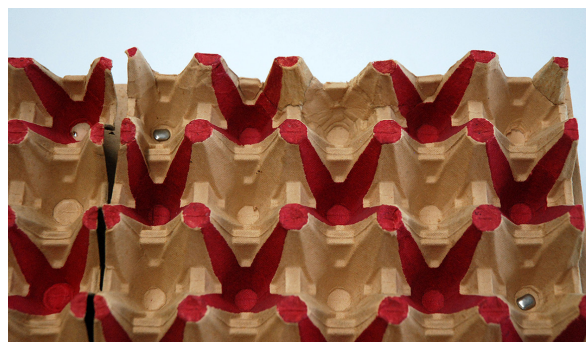


Fig. 3: *Object Made of Egg Cartons*. The damaged area after reconstruction

paste and Japanese paper. Most of the reattached and mended areas were situated at the edges of the object, making the white Japanese paper used in the process quite distracting, especially given the way the artwork was intended to be displayed (that is, vertically on the wall, exposing all sides except the bottom). The added Japanese paper was retouched using watercolour. Areas painted pink were easily reconstructed on parts of the carton that had been added, given the geometrical nature of the painted pattern (Fig. 3). Small scratches in the pink paint were also retouched where deemed necessary. For this, a mixture of rice starch and dry pigments was chosen due to the density and stiffness of the mixed paint that prevented it from bleeding into the highly porous material, enabling it to remain on top and dry precisely where it was placed.

The object was displayed using pre-existing holes in the cardboard base of the object that had been reinforced using Japanese paper.

The conservation-restoration of the object resulted in the preservation of its material form and the idea of emphasizing the geometrical nature of the shape of an egg carton through the reconstruction of some missing areas that were detrimental to its expressional value.

### ***Verbo Voco Visual, Westeast***

The second art piece that shall now be discussed is an art book. The journal *Verbo*

*Voco Visual* was created by a collective of artists called Westeast in 1980. Formed in 1978 by Franci Zagoričnik, Westeast was defined by its founder as an avant-garde international artistic association,<sup>5</sup> an artistic and organizational endeavour.<sup>6</sup> Zagoričnik, a poet, essayist and translator as well as a former member of OHO, focused on creating visual poetry, which consequently reflected heavily in the work of Westeast.

The collective was responsible for the publication of ten art books, each of which focused on a different theme.<sup>7</sup> These books were works of mail art. The system implemented was as follows: after determining the theme of the journal, a call for artworks was sent to artists all over Europe by Franci Zagoričnik, who would act as editor to the miscellanies. Several artists would produce an artwork limited by a particular format (usually this was a standard A4 page),<sup>8</sup> multiply it a certain number of times (most commonly producing between 200 and 350 copies)<sup>9</sup> and send those back to the editor. Zagoričnik and other members of the collective would then bind these miscellanies and then send a copy back to each of the contributing artists. Some of the books were produced as hand-made journals or catalogues, while others were published as part of different magazines and periodicals, such as *Dialogi* in Maribor, *Pitanja* in Zagreb and *Delo* in Belgrade.<sup>10</sup>

In the politically divided Europe of the 1970s and '80s, this was a way of exchanging ideas and ideologically bridging geographical and political divides between the West and the East, as the name of the collective



Fig. 4: Both copies of the Westeast *Verbo Voco Visual* art books that are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana; copy no. 146 on the left and no. 28 on the right

Westeast implied. This gave the project a socio-political dimension along with an aesthetic one.<sup>11</sup>

The object of this discussion will be a copy of the fourth of the Westeast books entitled *Verbo Voco Visual*, copy number 146 of 300 copies. The Museum of Modern Art owns two copies of this particular miscellany: number 28 and 146 (Fig. 4). There are slight differences in the contributions they contain, limited to the colours of pens used or the placement of added elements, for example. There is, however, an evident difference in the condition of the two copies. These stem solely from their being kept in different environments for a number of years. As soon as we open copy number 146, we can plainly see that what caused the book the most harm was excessive moisture. Significant traces of mould are visible on many of the pages, especially those close to the covers (Fig. 5), which could be explained by a greater amount of what was most likely an organic adhesive used in the binding process. Traces of moulds can, in fact, be seen wherever this type of adhesive was likely used.<sup>12</sup> Pages of paper are warped

5 F. ZAGORIČNIK: 'Podobe Besed' <<https://mgml.si/sl/bezi-grajska-galerija-1/razstave/24/franci-zagoricnik-podobe-besed/>> [accessed 15 June 2019].

6 N. MARKOVIČ, 'LJ: knjiga umetnika' (unpublished thesis, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, 2012) <<https://repozitorij.uni-lj.si/IzpisGradiva.php?id=26683&lang=eng&prip=rung:9127222:d5>> [accessed 15 June 2019], p. 38.

7 MARKOVIČ, note 6, 38.

8 MARKOVIČ, note 6, 39.

9 'Projekt Westeast Se Ozira Nazaj - RTVSLO.SI' <<https://www.rtv slo.si/kultura/razstave/projekt-westeast-se-ozira-nazaj/142801>> [accessed 15 June 2019].

10 MARKOVIČ, note 6, 40.

11 MARKOVIČ, note 6, 40.

12 The affected pages were examined using a digital microscope and ultraviolet illumination. The latter showed several different colours of fluorescence, indicating the presence of several species of mould, or their traces. Multiple microscopic examination in the time span of several weeks suggested no recent growth of the mould, but no expert testing was done to determine the species or activity of the organism.

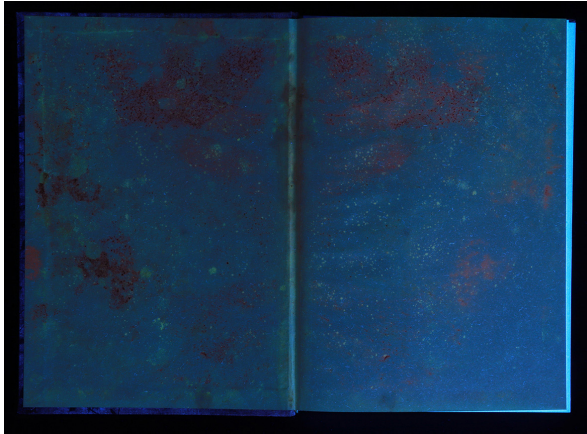


Fig. 5: *Verbo Voco Visual*. Different species of moulds seen under UV illumination

throughout the book, which is partially due to the artistic contributions it contains, a pencil glued to one of the pages, for example (Fig. 6). If we compare it to the other copy of the book in the museum's collection (copy number 28), we can see that moisture greatly accentuated these deformations.

Damage due to elevated humidity is perhaps most dramatically seen in contributions that contain metal elements, such as nails and staples, some of which rusted considerably and left dramatic marks and stains on several pages surrounding the metal-containing contributions. In certain instances, rust corroded the support material, etching holes into the paper. Some interesting problems to which moisture was a contributing factor but not the only one responsible for decay included a folio containing several pieces of graphite that were taped to the page using transparent self-adhesive tape (Fig. 7). The adhesive properties of the tape had failed, detaching from the page along with the pieces of graphite, while the glue itself darkened visibly.

When this piece came to the conservation studio, a discussion arose about the most suitable approach we should take to preserve this art book in its most meaningful form.<sup>13</sup> The fact is that the majority of the changes that had occurred in and on the

13 Numerous discussions with Nada Madžarac, MA (Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana) and a conversation with Prof. Jedert Vodopivec Tomažič (Archives of the Republic of Slovenia) on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019.



Fig. 6: *Verbo Voco Visual*. A contribution to the art book containing a pencil adhered to the page, causing paper deformation that was accentuated by elevated moisture

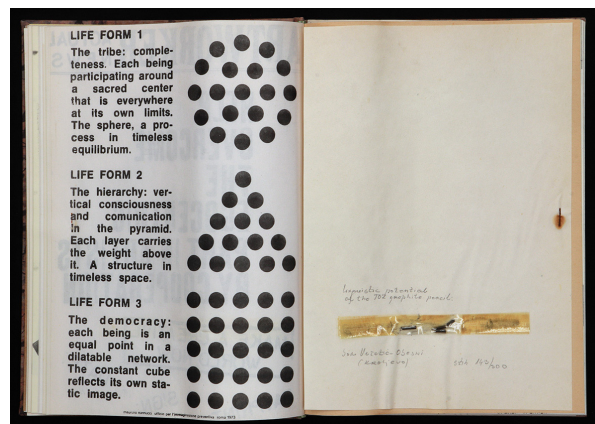


Fig. 7: *Verbo Voco Visual*. Degraded adhesive tape adhering pieces of graphite to one of the pages

book were simply irreversible. The mould and rust stains were not easily removable and most likely impossible to erase. The wide variety of authors and concepts contained in each of the miscellanies suggest a great abundance of different materials, ranging from papers of different types, thicknesses, and finishes to different inks, pens and pencils, not to mention a variety of unorthodox added elements, some of which have already been mentioned. The differences in these materials also imply their various reactions to moisture, solvents and other factors, prohibiting the use of any of them in fear of causing harm to or accelerating the decay of one containing element or another. Considering these facts, an attempt at removing or lessening the rust

and mould caused stains, would mean unbinding the glue-bound book. Given the uncertain results of such an attempt, the downsides far outweigh its benefits. The fact that the art book in question is one copy out of 300 is also something to consider. The reasoning behind any restoration procedure would be of an exclusively aesthetic nature and in this case and so more detrimental than beneficial. It would perhaps also be morally questionable, considering the spirit in which the contributions in these journals were created: not as precious one-of-a-kind objects, but something that would convey an idea the artist wanted to express and something that could be easily reproduced, without this idea being lost in the process.

These considerations all contributed to deciding on non-invasive conservation in an attempt to best preserve *Verbo Voco Visual*. Further damage would be prevented through appropriate storage, rather than through more invasive procedures.

Conservation processes are currently ongoing. Following the initial inspection and documentation, the journal was cleaned. Dry cleaning methods were employed, using soft bristle brushes, focusing on pages that had visible mould remnants present. In the future, added elements that had detached from the pages will be reattached. Those include a stamp that had detached from the page, for example, as well as the previously mentioned piece of adhesive tape with pieces of graphite. Its side edges will be adhered back to the page, ensuring it does not become lost during any handling of the journal. Very thin pieces of acid-free paper that will not significantly affect the thickness of the book will be placed next to more problematic pages in order to provide an additional barrier between those folios and the rest. A protective case will be made from archival materials. Most importantly, proper storage conditions will have to be maintained, and the book must be inspected on a regular basis. While the traces of mould and metal corrosion that have already occurred will remain visible,

following these precautions should ensure there is no further mould growth or additional rusting of the metal elements.

## Conclusion

We can see by studying only two objects created in the last century – geographically and ideologically not very far from each other – that there are vast differences in how an object can and should be treated. Considering the diversity of approaches, methods and results in creating artwork in this era, perhaps that comes as no surprise. With artists moving away from all pre-set rules in art, conservators who work with these objects must also readjust their standards of what contemporary conservation should be. An artistic object's materiality often contains different meanings in contemporary art; not solely as its physical component, but an expressive element crucial to its communication with its audience. In his article on bespoke ethics in the conservation of contemporary art, Glenn Wharton emphasises the importance of judging "the different values that are at stake in the work and their relative importance".<sup>14</sup> Conservation solutions that have thus far been discussed in this contribution hopefully illustrate the compromises inherent in favouring one value of one artwork over another – the conceptual over the documentation value of an object or the latter over an aesthetic one. What the approaches chosen do have in common, however, is the imperative responsibility of preserving the idea conveyed by the artwork, an integral part of an artistic object that sets it apart from other historical documents of human activity.

Contemporary art rarely uses traditional materials or at least does not employ them in the tried and tested ways in which they were employed in the past. Endless combinations of different materials and meanings

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14 G. WHARTON, 'Bespoke Ethics and Moral Casuistry in the Conservation of Contemporary Art', in: *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 41.1 (2018), 58–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2017.1417141>>.

that are placed in them can make the conservation of contemporary art “uncharted territory”. What quickly becomes evident is that Brandi’s *Theory of Restoration*<sup>15</sup> and the ethical guidelines that have served us in navigating towards responsible conservation are no longer applicable in some contemporary art cases. We are faced with an array of messy solutions that sometimes result in having to accept the fact that some artworks perhaps become “unrestorable” or in any case “unexhibitable” over time. An umbrella approach to conservation ethics is no longer sustainable, and the necessity of being truly prudent in our decision making, considering all approaches and, most importantly, studying contemporary art pieces solely on a case-to-case basis is paramount. For now, an ideal and widely agreed on suggestion on the course of action regarding the conservation of contemporary works of art is perhaps still impossible to determine, so this seems like the safest way of ensuring the most ethical means of preserving the objects of contemporary art and the ideas conveyed by them.

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15 C. BRANDI - G. BASILE, *Theory of Restoration, Arte e Restauro* (Roma : Firenze: Istituto centrale per il restauro ; Nardini, 2005).

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