Fail better (Hamburg, 6-8 Dec 13)

Hamburg, Dec 6–08, 2013
Registration deadline: Nov 24, 2013

Patricia Brozio

FAIL BETTER - VDR-Symposium about Conservation Practice and Decision Making in Modern and Contemporary Art
Hamburger Kunsthalle

“Try again / fail again / fail better,” is a quote by the Irish writer Samuel Beckett that inspired a recent exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in which artists explored the theme of Failure in both its playful and tragic aspects.

Custodians and conservators of modern and contemporary art are confronted with the consequences of the exploratory and experimental approach that has characterized much art of the modern era. Together they have faced new challenges and developed new responses when artist techniques and practices have moved from traditional towards less durable materials and formats. “One More than One” is the title of an exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle with works by Eva Hesse – an artist whose works very much reflect this challenge. And although conservators have benefited from research to improve their technical capabilities and treatments have become more science based, it has also become more common to replace unstable or failed materials in degrading artworks.

The symposium is an opportunity to examine this practice in relation to sculptural works as it raises difficult questions that challenge a conservator’s aspiration to preserve the original material of an artwork - questions such as:

• What constitutes ‘Failure’ in a work of art? Is it when its material fails or it loses its meaning to a contemporary audience?
• What constitutes ‘Failure’ in conservation practice? Do we fail if we decide against replacement and accept the changes of degraded artworks?
• How important is the original?
• Is the complete replacement of degraded artworks ever acceptable?
• What is the limit of replaceability? Is there a spectrum from retouching to reconstruction?
• Are there problems about replacement if the artist sanctions it?
• Is replacement that is contrary to an artist’s intention or the artist’s estate instructions ever justified?
• Should decisions be based on social consensus, a scholarly elite or ethical principles?
• Can we develop guidelines for decision making when we are confronted with the option of a replacement?

Perhaps due to the varied nature of modern and contemporary art and the number of interested specialists seeking a collaborative solution, there has not developed a standard approach towards replacement parts. But as more modern works appear to be reaching the end of their 'working life' more custodians and conservators are facing decisions about retirement or replacement of their artworks.

This symposium will provide a platform for international exchange on case studies, create room for discussions on these issues and hopefully indicate possible directions for action or for not taking action.

Internationally recognized senior conservators who are pioneering experts in the conservation of modern and contemporary art are invited to reflect on their views on these issues today. The Hamburger Kunsthalle has a large collection of contemporary artworks and provides a perfect setting to debate these conservation issues on an international level. There will also be guided tours through the accompanying exhibition of Eva Hesse and Gego and a publication of the film- and video exhibition Fail better will be available.

PROGRAMME

FRIDAY, 6 December 2013

10 am – 5.45 pm

Welcome by Prof. Hubertus Gaßner, director, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

Introduction by Barbara Sommermeyer, conservator of Contemporary Art, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

Session 1: About Failure

Brigitte Kölle, who curated the film and video exhibition 'Fail better' (Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1 March – 11 August 2013), will present a critical approach to failure, pointing to some of its possible origins and how different artists have dealt with failure in their work in a variety of ways.

Silke Zeich from the Museum Folkwang Essen will approach failure from a conservator's perspective, and discuss what it may mean in terms of professional standpoints for conservators e.g. is not taking action a failure?

IJsbrand Hummelen, senior researcher/conservator at the RCE in Amsterdam, will chair the questions and answers afterwards.

Lunch Guided tours through the Eva Hesse and Gego exhibitions by the curators Brigitte Kölle and Petra Roettig.

Session 2: Original versus Replacement

Elisabeth Bushart is head of conservation at the Museum Brandhorst in Munich. She will talk about her experience and ideas on the conservation of Serial Art, where objects are industrially produced but constitute original artworks nonetheless, and as such, may be considered irreplaceable.

Eleonora Nagy works as a freelance conservator and as a part-time sculpture conservator at the Whitney Museum, New York. In her work, she favours conserving the original artwork instead of replacing it. Especially in the conservation of Minimal Art objects, this can be an extraordinary challenge, which she will address through critical reviews of replacement case studies.

Iris Winkelmeyer, head of conservation at the Lenbachhaus in Munich, will chair the panel discussion, in which differences between the two types of artworks will be discussed and the decision-making with regards to other types of artworks will be considered.

Evening reception on a touring barge boat.

SATURDAY, 7 December 2013

10 am – 5.45 pm
Short welcome by Barbara Sommermeyer

Session 3: Decision Making and Change of Roles

IJsbrand Hummelen will talk about the evolution of decision-making processes since the “Modern Art: Who Cares?” symposium in 1997, and reflect on how professional roles may have changed since then.

Matthew Gale will present his experience at Tate from a curatorial point of view. At the Tate Replica Project in 2008, many curators and conservators discussed the difficulties and possibilities related to reproductions, replacements and replicas. The ensuing debate (moderator to be announced) will address this controversial issue by considering different strategies and decision--making processes, as well as the evolving roles of curators and conservators in this regard.

Lunch

Session 4: Re-Evaluation of Replacements and Decision-Making Processes

Lyndsey Morgan, freelance conservator from London, will critically review the decision-making process concerning the replica of Naum Gabo’s sculptures at Tate. Retrospectively, she will speak about the difficulties and failures involved in that process and re-evaluate the decision-making.

Michelle Barger will discuss the idea of representing ephemeral works by Eva Hesse, and explain the decision-making at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with regards to the conservation of works by living artists.

Derek Pullen, freelance conservator from London, will chair the panel and discuss the different approaches and difficulties of decision-making when conservators are confronted with an artwork of a living artist in contrast to an artwork where, for example, the artist’s foundation is involved.

Closing Remarks Tba will refer to what was most inspiring from all presentations and discussions and give an idea of a possible future regarding the replacement of artworks. What can we learn from this? Where does this lead us? What would be the next step?

Short farewell by Barbara Sommermeyer.

SUNDAY, 8 December 2013

9.30-11 am and 2 pm – 3 pm
Guided visit to the construction site of the Elbphilharmonie (Herzog & de Meuron) and guided tour of Santiago Sierra's exhibition at the Deichtorhallen/ Falckenberg Collection.

REGISTRATION & INFORMATION
http://restauratoren.de/termine-details/1130-fail-better.html
For enquiries email fail-better@restauratoren.de.
ORGANIZED BY
Barbara Sommermeyer, conservator, Hamburger Kunsthalle
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