

# Why Do We Restore Artworks and Many Other Objects?

*By Bernard Sève*

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**From ethnological objects to contemporary installations, everything is now susceptible to being restored. According to Jean-Pierre Cometti, this is the mark of an era in which artistic and cultural objects are “transitive” and reversible, in the sense that they can exchange positions.**

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*Reviewed: Jean-Pierre Cometti, *Conserver/ Restaurer. L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa préservation technique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, 320 p., 23 €.*

“Few philosophers have taken an interest” in issues of conservation and restoration, writes Jean-Pierre Cometti in what will remain one of his last three books.<sup>1</sup> This observation is true, and in this regard the publication of Cometti’s book is welcome. The latter draws attention to a long-concealed aspect of the existence of artworks: conservation and restoration operations. While, as Cometti puts it, “any object susceptible to undergoing measures of conservation or restoration has the meaning of a problem” (p. 184), the fact of restoration and its modalities pose many other problems: Why do we restore? What do we restore? How do we restore? Restoration practices have been the locus of passionate controversy. Without going back as far as the history of the *Laocoon*’s restorations, de-restorations and re-restorations, we can mention the violent quarrels that took place between 1980 and 1994 over the restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, or the no less vivid ones that occurred more recently over the restoration of Leonardo da Vinci’s *St Anne* (at the Louvres Museum). The

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Cometti, *Conserver/ Restaurer*, p. 194; note that the book thankfully contains an *Index Nominum* and an *Index Rerum*. Two other books by Cometti were also published in early 2016: *La Démocratie radicale, lire John Dewey*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, and *La nouvelle aura, Économies de l'art et de la culture*, Paris, Questions Théoriques, 2016. Born on 22 May 1944, Cometti died on 4 January 2016. See the portrait Roger Pouivet devoted to him in *Le Monde* on 11 January 2016.

recent destruction of monuments (in Palmyra) and artistic objects makes it all the more necessary to reflect on what we do when we restore.

Restoration operations are now routinely performed under the eyes of the public (the restoration of the polyptych of the *Mystical Lamb* by the Van Eyck brothers at the *Museum voor Schone Kunsten* in Ghent, scheduled for completion in 2019, is a good example).<sup>2</sup> Cometti's book is, as it were, the philosophical answer to this visibilization of formerly hidden, if not secret, operations. Yet Cometti does not seek to shed light on the concrete techniques of conservation-restoration, but to reveal the intellectual (philosophical, ontological, legal) presuppositions of such operations.

Let us be clear from the outset, *Conserver/Restorer* (Conserve/Restore) is by no means an educational book. The author deliberately chooses to adopt a "fairly abstract, and perhaps overly elliptical" approach (p. 286, note 1). While the book contains many examples of restored or restorable *objects*, it includes few actual *restorations*. In a somewhat disconcerting manner, Cometti neither evokes nor discusses the meaning of the three concepts that have become commonplace among members of the profession: preventive conservation, curative conservation and conservation-restoration.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he pithily states the three principles that broadly (but not exclusively) govern contemporary restoration practices: the principles of stability, reversibility, and legibility (p. 270, note 10).

What Cometti calls "the principle of legibility" likely refers to the "anti-illusionist" choices made by many restorers, within the limits of what their public or private clients demand. He contrasts illusionist restoration, which is defined not so much by the fact of restoring the object to its supposedly primitive state—as if it had never been damaged or altered—but by the impression of integrity conveyed by the restored object, with what is sometimes termed "perceptible restoration," whereby a discreet but visible mark must make it clear that the object has been restored—for instance, the paint will be slightly lighter where the canvas has been restored. As for the very important principle of reversibility, which constituted a veritable epistemological turning point in restoration practices, it is too briefly summarized:

Reversibility [...] stipulates that no intervention should be definitive, which amounts to considering that other interventions are possible (p. 278, note 1).

More specifically, the principle of reversibility states that it must be possible to physically return the restored object to its original state before restoration operations, without the risk that this return will damage the other parts of the object.

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<sup>2</sup> See in particular issue no. 5 of CeROArt, "La Restauration en scène et en coulisses," 2010, <http://ceroart.revues.org/1399>.

<sup>3</sup> This distinction is nevertheless mentioned on p. 59, but in a different vocabulary.

These often very brief explanations are found not in the text but, significantly, in the book's endnotes. The reader should not skip these notes—although their grouping at the end of the book renders the permanent back and forth between them and the text fairly inconvenient. For many of these notes, which are sometimes lengthy, provide substantial content: on the status of artistic properties, which are inferred rather than observed (p. 252, note 3); on the dispute over intent (p. 257, note 26); or on the completion and incompleteness of artworks (p. 273, note 26). To conclude with the elliptical dimension of the book, let us note that Cometti very often alludes to the thought of Cesare Brandi, who in 1963 authored an important *Theory of Restoration* that allegedly expresses “the spontaneous philosophy of restorers” (p. 186), but without ever clearly engaging with him (except perhaps on pp. 186–187), which is a little frustrating for the reader.<sup>4</sup>

## Restoration: A Prism for Ontology

*Conserver/Restorer* is composed of nine chapters and an appendix. The chapters deal respectively with: the concepts of artwork and artistic property (chapter 1); the notions of identity, integrity, and authenticity (chapter 2); the multiple functions of artworks and objects (chapter 3); the notion of “contemporaneity” (chapter 4); the restoration of ethnographic objects (chapter 5); the concepts of replica, reconstitution, and repetition (chapter 6); and the legal dimensions of restoration (chapter 7). The short chapter 8 raises certain methodological questions, while chapter 9 and the conclusion focus on the issues of time, memory, and historicity.

While this overview gives an idea of the great diversity of the themes covered, it does not yet allow to determine the real object of the book, its point of unity. The title of the book, *Conserver/Restorer*, contains a slash between the two concepts, which separates and even opposes them to each other; Cometti, however, continuously speaks in the book of conservation-restoration with a hyphen (which is the customary usage today). As I have already indicated, Cometti does not elaborate on the differences between preventive conservation, curative conservation, and conservation-restoration, or on the fact that restoration has since recently been considered as one of the forms of conservation, and not as an intervention rendered necessary by the failure of conservation methods. The meaning of the title *Conserver/Restorer*, with its specific typography, therefore remains enigmatic. My hypothesis is that the real object of the book is to be found in the subtitle, “L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa préservation technique” (The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Preservation). Note the Benjaminian echo in this subtitle, an echo redoubled by a second echo provided by the title of Cometti's other book on aesthetics published in 2016, *La Nouvelle aura* (The New Aura)—and indeed, the two books gain from being read in parallel as they share common themes. The object of *Conserver/Restorer* thus becomes clear: It is less a book on conservation-restoration—its techniques, history, and methodological controversies—than

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<sup>4</sup> Cesare Brandi, *Théorie de la restauration*, translated by Monique Baccelli, Paris, Allia, 2011; see also the translation by Colette Déroche, with an introduction by Georges Brunel, École Nationale du Patrimoine, 2001.

a reflection on what conservation-restoration practices teach us about art, or, rather, on what art has become over the last century. This interpretation is supported by some of Cometti's formulas:

Problems of conservation-restoration are especially conducive to highlighting the nature of the conceptual readjustments imposed on philosophy by artistic or cultural objects (p. 185; for similar ideas, see pp. 100, 195, 283).

Conservation-restoration is an ontological prism or indicator, and the focal (but not unique) point of the book is clearly ontological in nature: to determine the essence of artworks, the nature of their properties (if any), and their relations with other types of object. These are all disputed questions which Cometti significantly addressed long ago. The point is not so much to reflect on *how* one restores as to examine *why* one restores and, above all, *what* one restores.

In this respect, the book's contribution is to take into account the extraordinary contemporary expansion of the field of restorable objects. For a long time, writes Cometti, only masterpieces (paintings, sculptures) and highly valuable objects (pieces of furniture or goldsmithery) were restored. The novelty is that "ethnographic objects" (African masks, votive statuettes, weapons) and contemporary pieces (assembly objects, street art, installations) are now also being restored. However, these new "candidates for restoration" pose specific ontological problems. Restoration is conceived and practiced differently depending on whether it concerns an object that is "holistic," conceived as a "whole complete in itself"—as per Karl-Philipp Moritz's "romantic" formulation—and marked by the full interdependence of the parts and the whole, or an object that is put together or assembled, and whose parts are consequently far more autonomous.

According to Cometti, commonplace conceptions of restoration—the theoretical form that Brandi gave to them—are tailored to the artwork construed as an organic and autonomous whole: the painting, the statue. The new restorable objects compel the philosopher (and should compel the restorer) to develop a new "unstable" (p. 47 sq.) or "friable" ontology. This ontology is in fact that of pragmatism, of which Cometti has been a major representative in recent years in France,<sup>5</sup> even though he also draws on both Goodman and Dewey. Cometti counters the realistic metaphysical approach, whereby aesthetic properties are contained in the artwork, with a "philosophy of practice," which is also opposed to what Dewey calls "spectator theory" (pp. 70-71). This philosophy posits that artistic properties "have their source, not in intrinsic objectual characteristics, but in modes of use, activation, and operation" (p. 32). It seeks to "replace the concept of artwork, conceived in its closure and autonomy, with that of experience" (p. 47).

It is not physical and material characteristics that define an object—and hence the identity of that object—but the uses to which it can be put (p. 71).

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<sup>5</sup> See in particular Jean-Pierre Cometti, *Qu'est-ce que le pragmatisme?*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010.

The point, then, is to break away from an “ontology modeled on the paradigm of the object” or masterpiece (pp. 15, 53, 151).

These ideas will not surprise the reader of Cometti’s earlier books, since they provide the material for his key works on aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> In *Conservateur/Restorer*, the main Comettian themes are indeed taken up and redistributed in the light of conservation-restoration practices. Yet while the reader of Cometti will find herself in familiar territory, the innocent reader, on the contrary, runs the risks of losing herself in what may appear to her, at least at first, as a maze of questions, problems, concepts, and arguments that abound in a sometimes dizzying fashion.

## Everything Can Be Restored!

Conservation-restoration, says Cometti, concerns the entire spectrum of what is called “art,” and even what lies beyond it. “Cultural goods” (a broader concept) are also subject to conservation and restoration, as are technical objects and scientific or musical instruments (p. 76). Everything can be restored, because everything has become reversible: The everyday object can function as artwork, and the artwork can function as everyday object. This is the dual movement of artification of culture and culturization of art (pp. 84, 260 note 12), which introduces a “blurring of the relations between art and culture” (p. 99) and which produces “reversible and compatible, transitive beings” (p. 100)—sometimes art, sometimes non-art. Through this reversibility, any object can call for proper conservation, even restoration.

Cometti’s analysis then turns to ethnographic objects. Here, the paradox and anachronism of any restoration (p. 68) become obvious. The question of preservation, even of restoration, arises when the past is no longer present (p. 107). However, this concern is foreign to societies whose objects are meant to be preserved, objects that already decontextualized and “artialized”<sup>7</sup> by their transfer to museums; and indeed, the issue of conservation-restoration quite naturally intersects with that of museumification. Cometti does not fail to mention the risk of ethnocentrism (p. 116) inherent in these practices. The most interesting reflection is probably that on the composite character of ethnographic objects, which also applies to many artistic objects. The above-mentioned theme of “the whole and the parts” is one of the common threads of the book (pp. 18-20, 139). Cometti opposes the romantic ideology of the organic whole (the indissoluble unity) with the reality of composite

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<sup>6</sup> See mainly *L’Art sans qualités*, Paris, Farrago, 1999; *Art, modes d’emploi. Esquisses d’une philosophie de l’usage*, Paris, La Lettre volée, 2001; *La Force d’un malentendu, Essai sur l’art et la philosophie de l’art*, Paris, Questions théoriques, 2009; *Arts et facteurs d’art, Ontologies friables*, Rennes, PUR, 2012. See the review of this last book by Marianne Massin, “L’Art Désacralisé,” *La Vie des idées*, 8 November 2013 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/L-art-desacralise.html>).

<sup>7</sup> The word “artialization” (“artialisation” in French), which is borrowed from Alain Roger (*Nus et paysages*, Paris, Aubier, 1978; *Court Traité du paysage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997) who himself borrowed it from Montaigne, is used by Cometti in competition with “artification,” a term drawn from the collected volume edited by Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro, *De l’artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l’art*, Paris, Éditions de l’EHESS, 2012. I found no difference in meaning between the two terms in Cometti’s book.

artworks created through montage and juxtaposition. The elements of a composite object do not all have the same value, and they are not answerable to the same restorative concerns. It is worth noting that these analyses of the different forms of artistic totality (totality achieved by composition, assemblage, montage, and even chance) are most interesting.

“Installations” are also composite: Here contemporaneity intersects with ethnography, and the issues converge as “contemporary productions have or can have a status comparable to that of ethnographic objects” (p. 141).

The pieces that are part of an installation have the status of a ready-made, which means that they are integrated as elements in a montage (p. 97).<sup>8</sup>

If there is an (inactive) television set in an installation, and if this television set is damaged, is it not possible to replace it with any other set of roughly the same size and appearance? It is not the detail of its form or of its material that counts (pp. 96-97). But will the artist and gallery owner agree?

The paradox here is that, on the one hand, Cometti denounces the solidarity between the romantic notion of the closed artwork and the “restorative drive embedded” within it (p. 163), while, on the other hand, he analyzes the prodigious expansion of this drive in artistic and cultural fields that have specifically renounced this notion in favor of the open, the ephemeral, the interactive and the performative. Initially “embedded” in the concept of the closed artwork, the restorative drive has escaped it and now travels the world. But what might constitute the restoration of a land artwork, of a street art stencil (pp. 164-166, 267-268, note 7)? In principle, these artworks are not made to last and are therefore not meant to be preserved or restored; in practice, this is not the case, especially as regards commissioned artworks—here Cometti’s reflection encounters the law and, it must be said, certain illogicalities and contradictions of the art world. An entire chapter of the book is devoted to these problems. I would here like to point out, without dwelling on it, the interest of Cometti’s remarks on the notions of forgery, replica, reconstitution, and repetition.

## Written Texts and Performance Arts

The book is undoubtedly less clear, and less satisfying, regarding the issue of written texts (here we find Goodman’s allographic/autographic distinction) and performance arts. Cometti repeatedly claims that the question of conservation–restoration does not arise for notations (texts, scores). A distinction must be made. On the one hand, the material media of (literary or musical) texts clearly are preserved and restored (as Cometti observes on p. 125), and strict technical and legal rules are enacted, for instance, for the curators of regional or national archives. On the other hand, the text—which is immaterial—does not have to be

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<sup>8</sup> Some of Cometti’s statements about ready-made art remain opaque to me, for instance, when he writes: “One can even consider that when Picasso produced his series of variations on Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, it was as if the latter’s masterpiece functioned like a ready-made” (p. 98).

preserved or restored; it only needs to be available through its legible inscription on a material medium.

Here Cometti is right, but only up to a point. For the fact remains that texts themselves (not the material media of texts, but texts as such) are often altered by poor traditions, transmission errors, cumulative misreading, etc., and therefore need to be restored. For an example among thousands, see the magnificent pages dedicated to the scores of Janacek in Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed*.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, I cannot follow Cometti when he writes that "one does not restore a musical work or a play" (pp. 93, 154). To find the Urtext of a tragedy or sonata, to identify at least "its best text," has everything to do with restoration practices in painting or sculpture, and even with their sometimes fetishistic "drives"—though the material techniques of restoration operations partly differ between these artistic domains.

Neither can I follow Cometti when he writes that it is "the repetition [of a play's performance] at different times that ensures its conservation" (pp. 154, 177): The real history of theatre or opera shows quite the opposite. To repeat is to alter: one adds, cuts, transforms, adapts. It is equally difficult to accept the statement that the performing arts "handle their own transmission and memory" (p. 267, note 2). In an ideal history, multiple interpretations, whether good or bad, of a theatrical or musical text would leave the text in question unchanged, carefully preserved and transmitted. But in real history, interpretations enter the text, which is transformed and sometimes becomes unrecognizable in a few years. We speak of the "revision" of a score, which is to say, of its restoration. The question of the revision (restoration) of a text is, of course, entirely different from that of its interpretation (whereby, for instance, historicism and modernism can be opposed to each other). One may wish to have a Urtext at one's disposal to play a Bach cantata on modern instruments following a romantic aesthetic. It can also be argued on a different level that the Baroqueux movement in music sought to "restore" ancient musicality, not only by playing on period instruments, but also by employing appropriate gestures.

Similar remarks could be made concerning theatre, bearing in mind Eugène Green's *La parole baroque*,<sup>10</sup> and his desire to restore the gestures and modes of declamation of French baroque theatre. Insofar as these (vocal or bodily) gestures are forms of "practice," it may be possible to articulate these data with Cometti's general thought.

I will conclude on a minor point in the book, but one that is important for the question of conservation-restoration. Cometti repeatedly mentions musical instruments, which he considers to be "non-artistic objects" (p. 76). This seems to me questionable: Musical instruments are already artistic, both mediately, because they are the necessary means to turn musical compositions into sound, and immediately, because they are almost always built to be beautiful in themselves (one finds superbly decorated harpsichords in all musical

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<sup>9</sup> Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, New York, Harper Collins, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Eugène Green, *La Parole baroque*, Bruges, Desclée de Brouwer, 2001. One also speaks of "restored pronunciation."

instrument museums, to take only the most striking example) or terrifying to watch (Russian bassoons).

Beyond this minor point, it is surprising that Cometti should write, in a strangely concessive tone, “if we admit that they [musical instruments] can be candidates for conservation-restoration operations” (p. 253 note 5). This is not something to be admitted, but to be observed: As far back as our organological documentation goes, musical instruments have been preserved and restored; moreover, conservation-restoration workshops exist in all musical instrument museums, as well as in all great opera houses and philharmonic halls. In fact, the conservation-restoration of musical instruments reveals something very interesting: the distinction between three levels of conservation. Thanks to conservation-restoration, an instrument can find itself in a state of play, exhibition, or simple maintenance.<sup>11</sup> In the first case scenario, the instrument can be played: Musical instrument museums frequently organize concerts with their instruments. In the second, the instrument can be displayed but not played. For instance, when the frame of an old piano is too fragile to support the tension of the strings, these cannot be tightened; yet this is invisible to the eye, and so the piano can be exhibited without being played. In the third, the instrument is in such bad condition that it cannot be shown; it is kept in this condition—i.e., maintained—in the reserves. While this tripartition concerns only musical instruments (the only artistic objects that can be played), it may indirectly shed light on more general problems of conservation-restoration.<sup>12</sup>

Cometti addresses many other themes in his book, including memory, heritage, excessive attention to the present, the responsibility of the conservator-restorer, and the problems of decision making. Beyond making vigorous and provocative claims, he transforms the issue of conservation-restoration into a kind of instrument for scrutinizing our present. Despite the book’s subtitle, Cometti shows that conservation and restoration are not essentially a matter of “technical preservation.” These delicate manual gestures, these always difficult intellectual decisions, primarily express a certain contemporary relation to the art world and to the world at large. The book offers a new lens to better understand what constitutes artworks by studying what we do with them. This is because “conservation-restoration” and, I might add, its philosophical theorization, “contribute to an enrichment of experience” (p. 63).

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Jean-Philippe Échard, curator at the Musée des Instruments de Musique, Cité de la Musique, Paris, to whom I owe this clarification.

<sup>12</sup> On the topic of ethnographic objects, Cometti writes that “the conservation approach [is] oriented towards their presentation” (p. 139). This does not seem to me to be correct. Many (ethnographic, cultural, artistic) objects are “conserved” (in the active and non-passive sense) in museums, not to be displayed and shown to the public, but to be preserved from further deterioration. The idea is that (unpredictable) technical advances may make it possible to learn something from these objects in the near or distant future. As Cometti rightly puts it, “there is no artwork that is not a document” (p. 53), and many objects are kept in museum reserves precisely as documents which, while silent today, may be speaking tomorrow.



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