

The Modern Cult of Replicas: A Rieglian Analysis of Values in Replication

Sebastiano Barassi

Although it was written over a century ago, Alois Riegl's 'The Modern Cult of Monuments'¹ still provides a valid analytical framework for the study of key theoretical issues surrounding the transmission to the future of works of art. Given their age, some of the broader philosophical principles underlying the text may appear outdated (for example, Riegl's evolutionism and his theory of *Kunstwollen*, the notion of art specific to each period in history). However, Riegl's analysis of the processes governing the attribution of values to what he calls 'monuments' offers a useful starting point to address some of the ethical questions we are asking today.

Riegl defines the monument as an artefact that retains in itself, intentionally or unintentionally, an element of the past – a definition which effectively encompasses any object resulting from human activity. A significant distance in time from the beholder is therefore what first of all characterises a monument. For the purpose of this workshop, the definition can be restricted to sculptural works, in particular those in public collections.

For Riegl, different ages encourage the cult of different values. He believes that our attitude towards conservation depends entirely upon which values we attribute to the monument. Far from wanting to sanction any one value over another, his declared aim is to identify the processes of valuation that determine different approaches to conservation (for example, the preference for reconstruction to regain the original condition – if this is ever possible – or the acceptance of the aging process and the 'mortality' of the work).

A detailed summary of his text is not possible here, but a brief outline of the values classified by Riegl might be useful. He identifies two main categories: memory values and present-day values.

Memory values pertain to the satisfaction of psychological and intellectual needs. They are:

- *age-value* (somewhat Ruskinian), which promotes a view of the monument as an organic object in a state of degradation from the moment it is created. It thrives on a purely visual appreciation of age, regardless of historical or artistic considerations. Its cult demands no interference with the natural deterioration process, thus rejecting all forms of conservation;
- *historical-value*, which views the monument as representative of a particular aspect of a precise moment in history. Its emphasis is on documentary value and it aspires to have the monument as close as possible to the original state, primarily through preventative conservation;
- *intentional commemorative-value*, which only applies to intentional monuments (a minority of artefacts, those created specifically to memorialise an event or deed). It promotes the conservation of the monument as new, to honour adequately the event or person it memorialises. It advocates restoration and opposes *age-value*.

With its aspiration to an eternal present, the *intentional commemorative-value* is closely linked with **present-day values**. They are concerned with the satisfaction of both practical and aesthetic needs and include:

- *use-value*, which relates to functionality and everyday use. It is generally, but not always,

incompatible with *age-value*;

- *art-value*, which is sub-divided into:

1. *newness-value*, the opposite of *age-value*, demanding formal integrity and appreciated by most people as evidence of the triumph of human ingenuity over nature's destructive forces;
2. *relative art-value*, which advocates a purely aesthetic appreciation of the monument, in agreement with the contemporary *Kunstwollen*. It invokes in all cases conservation and at times even restoration to a pristine condition.

Riegl suggests that there are instances in which different values can coexist within the same work and others in which they may clash. A useful example, here, is that of the aspiration to combine *historical* and *newness-value*, in other words a situation in which a historical object is wanted in its pristine condition, without any degradation caused by the passage of time. This seems a frequent occurrence in our culture, which values age, documentary significance and aesthetic quality to similar degrees. How difficult it is to balance such diverse stances is evident in many of the modern debates on ethics in conservation (for example, the National Gallery cleaning controversy).

Replication represents a possible strategy to deal with this conflict. In his discussion of *historical-value*, Riegl notes that it is the one value that might invoke recreation or replication, provided that the original remains untouched to preserve its documentary integrity. He also remarks that over time the replica may itself acquire *historical-value*, especially in the case of the loss of the original, but it must always remain a simple aid to research, and should never be presented as a substitute for the original with historical and aesthetic value. Riegl mentions replication almost in passing and does not discuss other possible values of the replica, which I would like to attempt.

To do this, some broader issues need taking into account. Key points, for instance, are the values that an art work can acquire when it enters a public collection and, closely tied with that, the currently prevailing views over the social role of the art museum. I would propose that the intention to create replicas suggests an emphasis on *use-value* which reflects, as we shall see, current trends in museological thought. A replica can provide a 'usable' equivalent of an unusable original. This poses the question of its possible uses and users. Its primary function would in all probability be to serve the research needs of a specialist audience, who would certainly benefit from studying a three-dimensional replica of a lost/damaged sculpture more than from referring to photographic documentation alone. The status of the object as a simple aid to research would have to be made clear, possibly by creating a special study collection separate from the main collection (a choice which, incidentally, would also simplify management matters such as disposal).

But since we are discussing art works, the emphasis on *use* dovetails with that on *art-value*, and in particular *newness*. From this perspective, the replica could cater for our aesthetic needs, showing the sculpture in its intended condition. The original, though unusable for display purposes, would retain the all-important documentary value and should obviously be preserved. The two objects could live parallel lives, each with different values, and their combination would serve the needs that an original in good condition would normally serve.

However, as we have seen, after its creation the replica itself acquires *historical* and *age-value*. This poses the question, addressed further down, of its changing values over time, which is particularly relevant in relationship to its second possible use, in a public display. It seems reasonable to assume that museum visitors generally expect to encounter original art work, that is, objects with *historical* and/or *age-value* (in addition, of course, to *art-value*). Here lies the real strength of the museum as opposed to, say, the theme park or the illustrated publication, especially in an age that still values greatly history and authenticity but in which virtual realities and vicarious experiences are becoming commonplace. From this perspective, it is important to consider the broader cultural dynamics set in motion when a replica is displayed within a public collection.

It seems to me that one key consideration is the need to ensure that the expectations and trust of visitors

are not betrayed. It is thus imperative to be very open about the nature of the object, in order to offer the beholder an 'honest' experience. How can this be achieved? A fair approach could be to present the replica as an object that is immediately recognisable as different from an original. My experience suggests that, when visitors become aware of a replica's presence, they often question its display alongside original art work, and occasionally feel deceived. To avoid this, one option could be to present replicas as strictly documentary material and not art work (along the lines of documentary and archival material in exhibitions, usually in a dedicated section). The display alongside original work would also be possible, and at times necessary, but in this case the presence of a clear explanation of the nature of the object (through text panels) would be advisable.

More generally, we ought to ask ourselves if the replica is what the public wants to see when the original is no longer exhibitable. This calls for some considerations about the currently prevailing views over the social role of the art museum. The desire to create replicas for display purposes can be interpreted as the result of the museological trend to use collections primarily for educational purposes, with an essentially utilitarian approach. Clearly, this is quite far from the now seemingly out-of-fashion vision of the art museum as the repository of strictly original and irreplaceable works demonstrating the skills and 'genius' of artists. Yet, when it comes to art created in the last century, it could be argued that the emphasis on original works and the rejection of replication would serve to highlight the transient and precarious nature of some of its strands. In fact, I would contend that the need to accept (at least in some cases) this precariousness should be part of the educational message found in the museum. Does this rule out the use of replicas? Would their presence reinforce the sense of precariousness (by highlighting the loss of the original) or would it, instead, emphasise our desire to fight it? Again, the answer lies in how they are presented.

Some consideration should also be given to the life of the replica after its creation. If, as Riegl says, the simple passage of time turns an artefact into a monument, what will the value of replicas made today be in fifty years' time? Will they be seen as we intend them (provided that there is only one way of seeing them)? Or will they end up becoming 'real' art work, especially when all other original material evidence is lost? If so, should this stop us from replicating? An example in the Kettle's Yard collection offers some food for thought. Following the recent loss of the original (in a French collection), two 1960s bronze casts of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's 1913 marble carving *Maternity* represent the only remaining three-dimensional materialisation of the sculptor's idea. One of the casts is on permanent display, despite the fact that the notion of casting a work that places so much emphasis on the direct handling of stone and truth to materials sounds questionable to most modern ears. Yet only forty years ago this approach seemed acceptable to someone with the expertise of former Tate curator Jim Ede, who commissioned the casts. This case offers, in my view, a powerful reminder of one of the key issues surrounding replication: the uses which future generations might make of today's replicas. Tied with that, there are also considerations about the potential commercial value of replicas, although the assumption is that the replication under discussion here is strictly for research purposes and to be strictly controlled by museums and/or artist estates.

The casting of Gaudier-Brzeska's sculpture also offers an example of how views on the nature of the art work can shift quite dramatically within a relatively short period. From this perspective, replicas created today will provide future scholars with useful evidence of our attitudes towards conservation and, more broadly, towards art – in the same way as nineteenth-century forgeries of earlier works tell us about the way of seeing of that period (many of the forgeries then believed to be authentic today look obvious fakes to us). While this might make replicas useful documents, adding to their future *historical-value*, it also highlights the difficulty of adopting undisputedly objective parameters for their creation.

This raises one further issue, relating to a broader ethical principle. Assuming that replicas are generally made from deteriorated objects, is it possible to ensure that they are created without any degree of re-interpretation? Or should we take the view that this would not be a problem? The wider issue, here, is whether replication should be regulated by the same principles governing the conservation of originals, or if different rules should apply. This is particularly important in relation to the problem identified by Cesare Brandi as the interference of the conservator with the creative process. In my view its avoidance should remain one of the cornerstones of modern conservation, in spite of the declining popularity of Brandi's

Theory.

Moving beyond the Rieglian analysis, I would like to raise one last issue. There seems to be a consensus around the principle that the research preceding the creation of replicas should be as rigorous as our knowledge allows (and I must stress that in some cases it may conclude that replication is not the right answer, either because of technical issues or because of the artist's wish). From this perspective the outline of the Gabo project at Tate seems exemplary. But is it possible to conduct this amount of research for every work to be replicated? And if, as I suspect, the answer is negative, are we going to replicate only the degraded works of those artists in whom there is an interest and for whom resources are available? Or are we to lower the standards of research where resources may not be available? Is there not a risk, here, of selecting the study material available for future generations to the point of distorting their perception of a historical period?

In conclusion, whatever the answers to these questions, I believe that it is fundamental for us to acknowledge that it is our present judgment and taste, and not objective criteria, that drive our choices in conservation and replication. Riegl thought an *absolute art-value* completely independent of the present *Kunstwollen* impossible to define. For him the art work is 'artistic' not by nature but because *art-value* is attributed to it. This has become a central issue in later theoretical discussions on conservation – for example, in Benjamin's notion of 'aura' and Brandi's idea of the innate artistic nature of the art work and subsequent belief in the 'imperative of conservation'. More recently, David Phillips has remarked that authenticity is dependent upon attribution, conservation and display and is therefore subject to the changes in dominant taste and practice in all these areas.² I would add to these, when considering modern art, the radical shifts occurred in the theoretical approach to its creation. On the one hand, we have an art whose emphasis is on experimentation, ephemerality, exploration of material decadence and rejection of the traditional principles of conservation and collecting. On the other, there is a growing number of artists who create with the museum (that is, with historicisation and durability) in mind and whose works may even be considered as Riegl's intentional monuments, thus invoking more radical conservation and restoration. From this perspective a single, universally accepted approach to replication (and conservation in general) appears difficult to achieve, and the reliance on the 'case by case' principle still necessary. An ongoing debate and widened participation, as encouraged by this workshop, should certainly remain a key element of the decision-making process.

Notes

¹ Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, seine Wesen und seine Entstehung*, Vienna, 1903 (English translation: Forster and Ghirardo, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origins', in *Oppositions*, number 25, Fall 1982, pp. 21–51).

² David Phillips, *Exhibiting Authenticity*, Manchester, 1997.

This paper was written as a short discussion document for the Inherent Vice: The Replica and its Implications in Modern Sculpture Workshop, held at Tate Modern, 18–19 October 2007, and supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Other papers produced for this workshop can be found in [issue no.8](#) of Tate Papers.

Tate Papers Autumn 2007 © Sebastiano Barassi