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Cultural redemption: an exploration of the psychological dimensions of visual art restoration within post-traumatic culture

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Cultural Redemption

An exploration of the psychological dimensions
of Visual Art Restoration
within Post-traumatic Culture

Jeannine Howse

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts by Coursework and Research Report.

Johannesburg, 2010

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own (unaided) work. I am submitting it to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts by Coursework and Research Report. It has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at another university.

_____

Jeannine Howse, on this ..... day of ..... 2010.

Abstract

In this research report I explore the role of visual art restoration as a form of cultural redemption. My temporal focus is the post-traumatic moment in contemporary culture, and the process I am trying to make visible through the idea of restoration is the containment of loss. This process is redemptive in the sense that it saves the artwork from defect or loss through the expenditure of effort.

Speaking out of a post-colonial context, I focus primarily on the psychological impulse in Western restoration practice. While the impulse to conserve objects of cultural value is not limited to Western society, Western practice is my central concern. In my analysis therefore, I make use of different Western discursive histories and philosophies to examine this process and its cultural engagement. These include complex issues around value, trauma, and the therapeutic potential of art. My argument is centred around the psychological aspects of the traumatic crisis of loss. I examine how trauma impacts on the individual to throw some light on the manifestation of this crisis on a social level within the collective. This application of psychotherapy relates to the notions of collective guilt and the working through of loss as presented by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in *The Inability to Mourn* (1967/1975), where they explore how the psychological functions in similar ways on both levels.

My analysis is motivated by personal interest in art restoration and my own artistic practice. Through my research it became evident to me that very little has been written about restoration beyond its technical and historical range. It is important to note that a limited scope of relevant literature is available locally. Much more regarding the field of restoration is available overseas, as there has been increased interest in this field and the far-reaching after effects of restoration in recent times. Books, journals, and papers addressing the technical aspects of restoration abound. Yet while the technical is imperative for the continued development of restoration practice, it is equally necessary to explore the role this process has in wider psychological and cultural terms. In this research report I hope to present a start to understanding the effect of restoration within the wider cultural moment.

Acknowledgements

Undertaking a research report in this field was an enormous task, and would never have been possible without the help of certain people to whom thanks are due.

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Many thanks go to my family, and especially my sister who was always a pillar to lean against and a brain to pick. And of course lastly, thanks to my late mother. Without her love and unfailing support over the years I would never even have reached this point.

TO–.

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory--
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved´s bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

P.B. Shelley
[Published by Mrs. Shelley, “Posthumous Poems”, 1824]

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