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Challenges in the conservation of the work of León Ferrari

Gabriela Baldomá¹, Marta S. Maier²

¹Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari, Arte y Acervo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, ²UMYFOR (CONICET-UBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

When dealing with contemporary art, conservators have to address not only the material aspects of the artwork but also other highly complex issues. The Argentinian artist Leon Ferrari is a representative example. He created avant-garde art installations but also worked with traditional techniques. His works raise dilemmas over concepts such as authorship, authenticity, legitimacy of art. Some of his artworks only interested him as a means to express his opinions and he was not concerned about alterations in their appearance. Therefore, what should be kept in them is not in an area of certainty for conservators. An essential key for achieving a responsible and respectful conservation result, is to understand the ideology involved in each 'art piece' created by Ferrari.

Keywords: León Ferrari, Paper, Collage, Plastics, Degradation and conservation, Contemporary art

León Ferrari

León Ferrari was born in Argentina in 1920 and died there in 2013. He was a provocative artist who protested against social injustice in all its forms: abuse of power, discrimination, inequality, and intolerance. His works allude to sex, violence, war, and religion, provoking shock, disgust, and rejection in the audience. Graduating as an engineer, Ferrari was a self-taught artist. The logical approach inherent to his profession was imperative in the way he organized and produced his works: he enjoyed experimenting and looking for new materials and techniques that allowed expression of his art in different ways. He investigated and recorded in detail his experiences, creating notebooks to write down his ideas, results, comments, sketches, and even descriptions of complex works.

His output was vast and varied. He created avant-garde art installations and also worked with traditional techniques, such as collage, photography, drawing, printmaking, painting, sculpture, and writing (including Braille). The supports were made of a wide range of materials: ceramics, wood, paper, metal, glass, fabric, plastic, and also industrial objects. He used a diverse range of drawing materials, such as graphite pencil, ballpoint pens, marker, ink, colored pencils, pastel, charcoal, acrylic, watercolor, tempera, *gutta percha*, glitter, textured paint, animal

droppings, self-adhesive letters, and image reproduction techniques (including photocopying and cyanotype processes), materials with which he began to experiment in Brazil in 1977, during his exile after the forced disappearance of his son, Ariel, during the military dictatorship in Argentina.

The preservation of his work

Ferrari himself created, along with his family, a non-governmental organization to manage his legacy and that of his father, Augusto Ferrari, an architect, painter, and photographer. The FALFAA Foundation (Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari, Arte y Acervo) is responsible for caring for the artist's entire production, except the artworks belonging to museums and private collections. Since 2009, conservation for FALFAA has been run by Gabriela Baldomá.

Preserving Ferrari's production, which is huge and complex, involves solving a variety of problems, both technical and conceptual. The first issue has been systematizing the storage of the artworks in both FALFAA buildings: its headquarters and the artist's studio. Ferrari had full support from his family. Today, his children and grandchildren are FALFAA managers. The responsible attitude of the family members has been essential for the preservation of the collection. Despite having daily contact with the artist's production, they never forgot that the pieces are Ferrari's legacy for humanity.

Correspondence to: Gabriela Baldomá, Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari, Arte y Acervo, Pichincha 849 Capital Federal (caba) - C1219ACG, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Email: gabrielabaldoma@gmail.com

Cage with Birds

In 2009, Ferrari donated the installation *Jaula con Aves* (*Cage with Birds*) (Fig. 1) to the Museum Castagnino+Macro. Before starting the conservation process, the IICRAMC Institute chose this artwork as a case study within the project *Inside Installations Latin America*, coordinated by the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, Spain. In that context, applying the proposed research methodology, the IICRAMC team conducted a full interview with the artist, who explained his ideological stance in relation to conservation.

Cage with Birds is an installation with a long track record. Ferrari made successive versions, deepening its ironic aspect in response to audience reactions. In all versions, the public is faced with a large cage suspended from the ceiling of the room with several birds inside. Its base, formed by bars, is unlined and so the bird droppings fall directly onto the floor of the room, onto a printed version of the *Last Judgement* painted by Giotto, or Hieronymus Bosch, Fra Angelico or another great artist. A text by Ferrari is displayed close to the cage, to confirm that his work is a critique of the Catholic church: For example:

These birds are making, with their droppings, a collage on top of the *Last Judgement* by Giotto.



Figure 1 León Ferrari, *Jaula con Aves* (*Cage with Birds*), 2004–2008, from the *Excremento* (excrement) series. Museum Castagnino+Macro Collection.

As is known, the church states that the history of man on earth elapses between two judgemental episodes: it begins with the original sin of the rebel Eve ... and concludes with the last judgement, after the apocalypse, when most of the human race is thrown into the land of Satan ... so, this judgment, sung, painted, carved and engraved by the great Western artists, is a synthesis and an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pain, managed by Christian justice. On this idea, which fertilized and feeds our culture, on those songs; finches, canaries and doves are used to shed an opinion.

This installation is not easy to exhibit. It has many requirements: to buy birds; to maintain routines for achieving their survival (food, health, prevention of insect attacks); to preserve their droppings without this implying risks for visitors; to meet the demands of animal activists, and so on. These requirements obliged the conservators to draft a protocol with specifications for any institution receiving the artwork on loan.

The ‘reproductions of artworks’ created by the birds during an exhibition must be returned to the artwork owner. When Ferrari donated a version of the *Cage* to the Museum in Rosario, he gave it the rights to own the resulting ‘copies’. Therefore, does the museum own a device to create authentic Ferraris? The case has raised dilemmas over concepts such as authorship, authenticity, and legitimacy of art. It also has forced our team to redefine what we must preserve. And the question is: Which is the artwork? Is it the cage with the birds? Or is it the reproduction ‘painted’ with excrement? Is Ferrari the author of the reproductions, or are the birds the authors?

Moreover, Ferrari also surprises us in the material aspect of his work. He said, speaking about the use of excrement as a graphic medium: ‘Yes, I think it is interesting to find the aesthetic quality of the poop, which is a material like any other, right? It also has color ... I think I found an aesthetic material, almost as good as the paintings and much cheaper. Just give them [the birds] some birdseed.’

This ‘new material’ presents more challenges to the conservator: how to stabilize droppings? How to frame them?

Works on paper

The spectrum of conservation challenges when working with Ferrari’s art on paper is broad, ranging from repairing conventional damages to facing those caused by his experimental techniques. It is well known that newsprint deteriorates rapidly. Ferrari has used newspaper pages as a support, for writing and for collages. One good example is his original

piece for the series *Nosotros no sabemos* (*We didn't know*).¹ Most of his works with political content were writings on clippings of the printed newspapers.

Papers were also used by Ferrari to experiment with printing processes, such as photocopying and cyanotype (blueprint). He used these techniques to create works that he mailed from his temporary residence in exile, in Brazil, while emphasizing that mailing was a means to democratize art. These techniques are very unstable, and the works are vulnerable to light. Therefore, these works have become greatly damaged during display.

Ferrari was familiar with the resources used by architects. Typography and self-adhesive plastic (Letraset®) have been part of his writing tools for papers, which he then multiplied by the cyanotype process. He used Letraset® in his famous *Carta a Mondrian* (*Letter to Mondrian*). Over time, when the plastic and the adhesive deteriorate, the typography detaches, and the paper becomes stained.

The copies he made on coated paper are another source of problems because they are vanishing. Nowadays, the varnish has darkened and is causing color changes to the image. Unfortunately it cannot be removed without risk of causing even greater damage. In the work *Amante* (*Lover*), 1997, this problem occurs. On an image by the Japanese artist Utamaro, representing female masturbation, Ferrari selected some words attributed to Jesus Christ 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12: 31) and wrote them in Braille on a representation of a female clitoris. He commented, 'The Braille occurred to me because Borges was blind, but also he had some very beautiful love poems. Therefore I thought of using the language of blind people on nude photos of Man Ray and Scianna, and Tatiana Maiore. The idea of a love poem on the photographed naked girl arose from having to caress the image of the woman to read what was in the poetic text' (Zamorano Ferrari & Zamorano Ferrari, 2011, p. 119).

The curators, aware of the damage that the work would suffer when touched during exposure, decided to protect it by placing it behind glass, but this annulled the artist's intention. The decision was to display replicas to allow the audience to touch the Braille directly and, thus, to perceive the art as it was conceived.

Plastics

Plastics comprise an extraordinary range of materials made up of polymers, and additives that alter the



Figure 2 León Ferrari, *Maniquí transparente* (Transparent Mannequin), 1994, from the *Maniqués* (Mannequis) series. Ferrari Family Collection. Photo Adrián Rocha Novoa.

properties and stability of the final product. Objects made of some synthetic polymers, such as polyurethane, cellulose esters, and plasticized polyvinyl chloride (PVC), often quickly exhibit the effects of degradation, and are not easy materials to deal with in conservation: they suffer from discoloration, embrittlement or cracking (van Oosten, 2011). They change imperceptibly until opacity or stains make their alteration evident. Being aware of this, Ferrari had always agreed with conservators to replace damaged parts. However, in many cases this is not possible. For example, being conscious that the rubber or PVC flowers and animals (birds, butterflies, rats, cockroaches) which he used alter and degrade easily, he did not hesitate to give permission to replace them. The problem is that it is not easy to find exactly the same elements on the market. The same is evident when considering the 'modified' toys (*Superhero Christ*, *Virgin's Head inside Kettle*) and even more clearly appreciated in the series *Ideas for Hell 2000*, involving toasters, blenders, and other household appliances with figures of Christs, virgins, and saints attached. All are now stained and yellowed, but cannot be replaced because they are no longer being manufactured.

The series Ferrari started in 1944, involving plastic showcase female mannequins, forms another source of conflict for conservators. He wrote on their surface or glued on religious images, doves, and glitter. He also modified the insides, filling them with water, fish, and plastic plants. When the plastic mannequins aged, they became brittle and amber-colored, and therefore the writing acquires a different emphasis, because it prevails over the mannequins and completely alters the perception of the work (Fig. 2). In this case, clearly, the aged materials should be replaced, but this cannot be done because, in the substitution, the original writings of the author will be lost. The acrylics used as supports for

¹*Nosotros no Sabíamos*. 1976–2004. Collection of press cuttings made by the artist from 1976 in São Paulo and Buenos Aires on optical repression. (Author's edition)

writings are now losing their transparency. There are also bottles containing condoms: the condoms, although damaged, cannot be replaced because they hold interventions by Ferrari.

Ferrari worked with polyurethane from 2007 for the series *Los Músicos (The Musicians)*. He built these sculptures by holding wire structures on chairs, and then coating them with polyurethane foam spray, creating the figures of musicians, then painted them with watercolor, oil, and fluorescent paints. Finally the instruments, plastic eyes, pins, and necklaces were added (Fig. 3). Ferrari said, 'Polyurethane is a material used to cover cracks in the pipes. You pour the product and this creates things. There seems to be a small sculptor within the material. Generated forms are amazing, because nobody could imagine [them]' (Zamorano Ferrari & Zamorano Ferrari, 2011, p. 134). Some of his works on polyurethane already show deterioration: the expansion of the material caused cracks in the paint; in others the material is cracked, or has lost volume, while others have deformed (Fig. 4). The conflict is: what will we



Figure 3 León Ferrari, *Músico con Tuba (Musician with Tuba)*, 2007, from the *Los Músicos (The Musicians)* serie. Ferrari Family Collection. Photo Gustavo Lowry.

do when the damage gets worse? Will we continue exhibiting the originals or will we create replicas to replace them?

Test and monitoring

A comprehensive knowledge of the materials used by the artist, as well as monitoring physical and chemical changes in order to assess degradation processes, are part of the current trends in the field. We have started a research program, focused on the application of non-invasive techniques (using portable instruments such as X-ray fluorescence) to collect information *in situ* on the elements contained in the materials he used (Madariaga, 2015). These rapidly obtained analytical results will permit the influence of certain elements on the degradation of the plastics and papers involved in each piece to be inferred. Moreover, analysis of microsamples taken from deteriorated parts of his works by infrared spectroscopy and mass spectrometry will result in molecular information on the composition of the materials. In particular, we are considering employing attenuated total reflectance Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy, a well-established technique for the identification of plastics. One of its advantages is that it requires no sample preparation (Derrick *et al.*, 1999). In a few minutes, analysis and comparison with databases of reference spectra of different classes of synthetic polymers may result in the characterization of the plastic material. Paint and plastic formulations include organic pigments as well as inorganic extenders, such as chalk, china clay, and blanc fixe (barium sulfate) that may also be identified by infrared spectroscopy (Learner, 2005). In this way, the application of analytical techniques suitable for the



Figure 4 *Músico con Tuba (Musician with Tuba)*, detail of deterioration. Photo Gabriela Baldomá.

identification of the materials used by León Ferrari will allow us to get insight into his artistic technique and the problems in the conservation of the material aspect of his artworks.

Research and understanding

An essential key to conserving Ferrari's work has been to understand it. We have turned to four main sources: the documents in Ferrari's archive; the opinion of art critics; the records of the artist's reaction when his work was vandalized, and the records made during conservation interviews. Through these, we were able to understand the position that Ferrari assumed in order to rationalize the aging of his artworks, but when we knew about his reaction to vandalism, we realized that he could bear the deterioration of his work, taking it as an inspiring act. In 2004, his artwork *The City of Immortals*, an acrylic prism, modified with writings and containing white flowers, caused controversy and outrage, and was damaged by a group of people. Ferrari reacted to this act of vandalism by changing the name of the work to *Gracias Cardenal Bergoglio (Thank you Cardinal Bergoglio)* [now Pope Francis]. He also decided not to restore the damage and to let it stay, becoming part of the artwork.

Andrea Giunta, who has long studied the artist's work, explains that '...The visual-conceptual machine, on which Ferrari has organized his work, not only aims to describe the violence, to represent it; it also causes violence ... Ferrari interpolates for the viewer a clear message, which results in a necessary taking up of a position. In this taking a position, which can trigger acts of censorship and violence, the second moment of the artwork begins. By understanding his art making as a process, Ferrari allows the violence, generated by his own work, to saturate the limits of his initial statement. He collects all the waste that results from each arrival of his work in the public arena and turns it into his very stuff of creation' (Giunta, 2011).

Ferrari's work has two purposes: one is loudly and clearly socio-political, and the other is esthetic and artistic. In some of his artworks it is essential to retain the material aspect, but others only interested him as a means to express his opinions. Therefore, what should be kept in them is not clear.

La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana (The Western and Christian Civilization) (1965), is perhaps his most popular work. This is a sculpture in which a plaster Christ, of commercial origin, is crucified on a scale model of a US Air Force bomber plane made of polychromed wood. It is worth questioning whether the restoration of its materiality is the priority. It is necessary to reconsider if it is correct to treat this piece as a traditional sculpture, which entails the study and careful repair of its materials. What is the essential part of this piece? Is it the power of the image? And this power: does it lie in the appearance of the original materiality? Or does it increase with the marks of its own history? What should be preserved? The mobilizing power of this piece remains as intense as in 1965. Perhaps the greatest loss would be for it not to be exhibited, in the name of conservation.

Conclusions

Ongoing research seems to be the key for achieving a responsible and respectful conservation result, not only for the material artifacts, but also for the ideology involved in each 'art piece' created by Ferrari. This holistic approach is particularly applicable to this collection, but also for most of modern and contemporary art production. The Ferrari collection is particularly complex because of the variety of typologies; however, the conservation problems are very similar to those of most modern and contemporary art. The discussion on philosophical and ethical dilemmas regarding the conservation of Ferrari's vast and controversial legacy will therefore contribute to the debate on modern and contemporary art.

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