



Martin Kippenberger "Put your Freedom in the Corner, Save it for a Rainy Day", Detail, 1990. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo: B. Sommermeyer

FAIL BETTER

VDR-Symposium about
Conservation Practice and
Decision Making in Modern and
Contemporary Art.

Hamburger Kunsthalle, 6 – 8 December 2013
Conference Language: English

"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.

Organized by:

Barbara Sommermeyer, conservator, Hamburger Kunsthalle
and the *VDR Verband der Restauratoren*, Bonn

Advising Committee:

Derek Pullen, *Brigitte Kölle*, *Silvia Castro*

Kindly Supported by:

Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg
Alfred Toepfer Stiftung, Hamburg
The Gabo Trust for Sculpture Conservation, UK
Ausstellungsfonds der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg