

Ethics & Aesthetics

UKIC Paintings Section Meeting at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea
17th September 1999

Congratulations to the paintings section for having the vision to organise the recent conference Ethics & Aesthetics. At the moment there is a lot of talk in conservation circles of standards, ethics and quality yet these topics, as subjects in themselves, are rarely discussed in detail. Looking back on the day what impressed me most was the breadth of perspective from the speakers and the willingness of the delegates to explore their own ideas in the discussion session.

The morning had a number presentations that set the discussion in context. UKIC's chair Rob White gave a useful résumé of the history of professional development of UKIC reminding us that we have come down a long and winding road towards our current achievements. One highlight for me, in the morning session, was the presentation by the speaker from the BMA professional resources and research group. Listening to this presentation once was not enough for me to absorb all the points. It was clear that the BMA see their definition of ethical values as an essential component of the public's perception of the profession's trust-worthiness. As a result their ethical discussions involve non doctors and they are aware that their self regulation is a privilege that has to be earned by swiftly enforced ethical rules and values. I wish I could remember more of this paper and I am sure other would find it useful to be able to have a summary or at least copies of the overheads that Vivienne Nathason used.

The afternoon discussion groups were expertly introduced by Rachel Barker and Mary Bustin who succinctly outlined the ethical questions raised when conserving a piece of conceptual art (or a perspex box with water in it) and a piece of art where restoration that was approved by the artist now threatens contemporary understanding of the work. The discussions that followed started with questions about whether differing ethics apply according to 'type of art' but both groups swiftly moved to the conclusions that there were no 'absolute ethical standards' in conservation. So although the curator, artist or owner's wishes may often be decisive they are not fundamental. What I found interesting however, was that when anyone raised examples of ethical dilemmas that they had been presented with (such as cut a painting in half) it was obvious to everyone what an ethical response would be. One of the conclusions drawn from this was that the definition of conservation's ethical standards or guidelines must be grounded in peer review and assessment. This is an area that I think UKIC could work on. Perhaps we should have an open forum to discuss case studies and produce ethical guidelines based on practical examples. Certainly the approach of bodies like the BMA could be investigated.

The day closed with more mind expanding presentations. One, on the relationship of the public, the media, modern art, class and vandalism by Neil Mullholland sprung immediately to mind with the almost predictable assault on the Tracey Emin bed at the Tate. The day was too short, or my brain was too small, to take in the wealth of ideas on the day. I hope that the paintings section are able to publish some of the transcripts. I also hope that they maintain their vision and do more work on the issues raised by the day.

Jane Henderson