

LIVING ARTIST, LIVING ARTWORK? THE PROBLEM OF FADED COLOUR PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE WORK OF GER VAN ELK

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ABSTRACT

Current conservation ethics, based on the preservation of authentic material, are of little importance to an artist like Ger van Elk, to whom the conceptual message is more important than its material realization. This is illustrated by a recent conservation project in which the artist was involved. Ethical questions are raised, and judged against the background of an art-historical survey of the meaning of the artist's work in relation to the materials and techniques used. When preventive conservation fails and the museum seeks a solution in cooperation with the artist, the end result might be an authorized copy but what is left of the artistic value? Since photographic materials have their own characteristics and often show the effects of time, an alternative form of conservation treatment is proposed with respect to the original material. Coloured light is used as a 'retouching medium' to enhance a severely discoloured photograph which forms part of *Roquebrune*, a sculpture by Ger Van Elk from 1979.

INTRODUCTION

Brightly lit exhibition spaces and unsuitable storage facilities alter most artworks in which colour photographs are incorporated, as in the paintings and sculptural installations of Ger van Elk (b. Amsterdam, 1941). The artist's own solution, as carried out recently — to reproduce photographs which are nearly 30 years old and often painted or hand-manipulated, using the latest digital imaging techniques — raises questions about authenticity, patina, the meaning of materials and the artist's intention, then and now.¹ The conservator of modern art thus not only faces the challenge of solving problems relating to possible discrepancies between the meaning of the artwork, its original appearance and its current condition, but also has to act as a mediator between the artist and art history.

PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL MATTERS

Photography is often considered an immaterial, impersonal and therefore an 'objective' medium. This suited conceptual artists, in particular, since they wanted to suppress all personal touches in their work. Although Ger van Elk cannot be considered a true conceptual artist, his work may be looked at against this background. He considers photography mainly as a practical means of realizing his ideas. He has stated that the photograph in itself has no artistic value; it is the image that counts. This is why replacement of discoloured photographs in his work seems justified, and is generally assumed to be the solution to this problem.

Patina

This practice must be looked at critically, however, even when it is the artist himself who proposes reprinting the photographs. The photographic material in which the image exists, and in which the artistic idea is originally visualized, carries specific qualities that are characteristic of a certain era. Size, format, the type of surface and the colour range are all properties that vary over the years. The way photographs alter can also be related to a printing process or a certain manufacturer. These characteristics generate a secondary meaning in a photograph, apart from the image: one that is embedded in time and thus in art history. So even discoloration could be regarded as 'patina'.

Choice of materials

Furthermore, the look of a photograph is related to the artist, who chooses the brand, the surface quality, the paper, and the photo-

graphic process available at the time. Ger van Elk chose his materials carefully. In the 1970s he preferred Kodak's chromogenic prints to Cibachrome's silver dye-bleach prints, which are based on a totally different printing process. He disliked the harsh colours, the unnatural, vivid red and the glossy surface that characterized Cibachrome at that time. The chromogenic prints that Van Elk chose often had a silkscreened surface, typical of matt photographs in the early 1970s. Photographs with this finish were less vulnerable to scratches than glossy paper and this suited his unconventional use of photographs in sculpture and installations. This kind of surface also formed a good base to paint on.

Artistic freedom

The various optical characteristics can prove the authenticity of a 'vintage print' — a print contemporaneous with the negative, processed either by the artist, an assistant or the photographic laboratory, but at least with the artist's final approval. Ger van Elk recently printed some of his negatives from more than 30 years ago. He explained that he never got round to printing them at the time they were made, due to lack of money. The new prints do not have any of the characteristics of the early 1970s, nor will they show any discoloration. This challenges our notion of authenticity. A 30-year-old Ger van Elk with whiskers and wearing 'bell-bottom' trousers is shown in a large, colourful Cibachrome print which has the characteristics of the beginning of the twenty-first century. The artist does not mind the discrepancy between the image and the material used. He simply signed the work with two dates: one for the concept and one for the print. This illustrates the freedom of the artist. But when the artist wants to reprint or reproduce discoloured photographs in a work which is in a museum collection, must the conservator of modern art go along with him?

CHANGED ARTWORKS: RECENT CONSERVATION HISTORY

In two works by Ger van Elk from the early 1970s, the painted colour photographs had discoloured so badly that the artist suggested that the museum should reproduce them.

From the 1970s to the 1990s

C'est moi qui fait la musique (1973, 60 x 120 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, A25269) is an airbrushed photo-collage which shows the artist playing the piano, while his tailcoat straightens and the grand piano bends backwards, perfectly following the profile of the triangular wooden frame. The colour in the photographs of this popular artwork has shifted so badly that the airbrushed parts now stand out, which destroys the magical appearance of the manipulated image (Fig. 1). The discoloration reveals the techniques used, whereas the strength of the artwork should derive from the supposed realism of the image. In this condition, the work had lost its meaning and so a solution needed to be found.

Reproduction was considered the best way to solve the problem. Because the original negatives were missing, the artwork was scanned as a whole. The discoloured areas of the photographs were manipulated using digital imaging techniques, as a result of which the airbrushed areas 'disappeared'. When the image had been digitized, the artist decided to erase the seams in

¹ This article is adapted from the author's final diploma thesis on Ger van Elk and the problem of discoloration of colour photography in contemporary art [1], which contains a complete list of references.

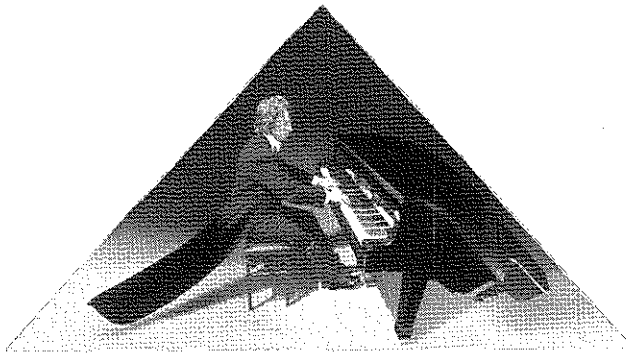


Fig. 1 Ger van Elk, *C'est moi qui fait la musique*, 1973, collage of three chromogenic colour photographs and airbrush on cardboard, 60 × 120 cm, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, A25269. This is the original work, without its triangular black frame, in its present condition. Discoloration of the photographs disturbs the appearance of the picture and this version is no longer on public display. Photo: Sanneke Stigter, January 2002

the collage as well, so that the new image would consist of a single piece. Cibachrome was chosen, whereas three chromogenic prints had been used originally. To give the digitally manipulated Lambda print the look of the original work, a professional airbrusher, still capable of deploying the techniques of this dying profession, applied a layer with the airbrush [2]. Only this time, the airbrush does not have the same function as in the original artwork since there is nothing to manipulate or cover up, except for the glossy surface of the reproduction which was in need of a more authentic appearance.

Reproduced painting

The same method of reproduction was used for *The Adieu I* (1974, 132 x 84 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, A35650). The original work consists of a large, matt, chromogenic colour photograph with a silkscreened surface, showing a painting on an easel in a theatrical setting with curtains hanging on either side, as in seventeenth-century *genre* paintings. The painting in the artwork shows the artist waving goodbye to the spectator; he is about to turn around and walk away to the vanishing point — a theatrical farewell to painting. Van Elk enhanced the large photograph with diluted acrylics and painterly brushwork and a felt-tip pen. This gives *The Adieu I* a poetic and impressionistic character, as if this really were his last 'painting'. So the techniques used originally are closely related to the subject matter.

It is surprising, therefore, that the artist wanted to make a digital scan of this work, too. The discoloration does not change the meaning of the artwork; it has only lost its 'fresh' appearance. But this is normal for a chromogenic Kodak print nearly 30 years old, and could be accepted as a sign of age or even patina. In the reproduction of *The Adieu I* none of the authentic characteristics can be seen. The matt appearance and the painterly surface have disappeared into the glossy surface of a Cibachrome. Van Elk painted some of the originally painted parts anew, resulting in a much glossier appearance, with no sense whatsoever of the impressionistic touch: he just traced the painting he had done nearly 30 years before. The artist was aware of this and decided not to paint the curtains, because he thought he would not be able to achieve the same effect [3]. So what we see in the museum now is a digitally manipulated glossy reproduction of a painting (in a photograph), enhanced with some paint (Fig. 2).

MATTER AND MEANING

So what actually happened here? In order to preserve the image of the artwork, the artist's original techniques and materials were completely revised in a new version. The original work remains

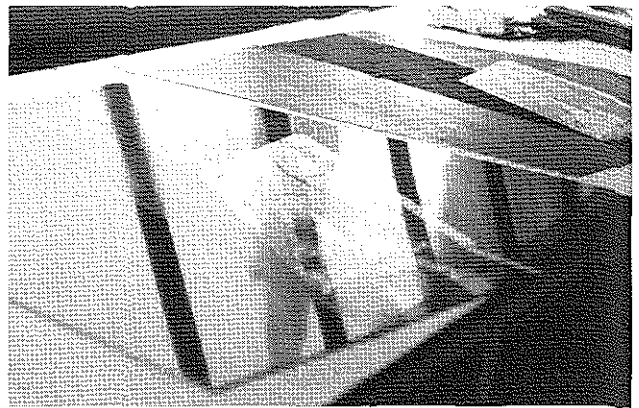


Fig. 2 Ger van Elk, *The Adieu I*, 132 × 84 cm, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, A35650. In the background is the original version of 1974 with a matt chromogenic colour photograph painted with dilute acrylics and felt-tip pen. At the front is the reproduction made in 2000: a glossy Cibachrome print, partly painted with acrylics and felt-tip pen. Photo: Sanneke Stigter, January 2002

untouched, however, and is kept in the same frame behind the new version, with an explanation by the artist on the back. Commenting on this recent conservation treatment, the artist states that the material and technical aspects of his work are of minor importance. However, from an art-historical perspective, his choice of materials and techniques is crucial to the meaning of many of his works.

When attitudes become form

Ger van Elk started his international career with contributions to the 1968 manifestation in Amalfi, 'Arte Povera + Azione Povera', and the exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form' in 1969 in Zürich and London, the show that introduced Conceptual Art to Europe. This is when Van Elk first used photography. He photographed a square metre of tiles in the pavement in front of the entrance of the show in Zürich, removed the tiles he had photographed and replaced them by a life-size enlargement of the photographic image, sealed with lacquer. By the time the 'floor-piece' got dirty, after thousands of pairs of feet had walked over it, one could hardly tell the difference between the real pavement and the image of it. The underlying idea of questioning the reality of the photographic image and the specific character of matter is a frequently recurring theme in the *œuvre* of Ger van Elk.

Questioning photographic reality

In the *Missing Persons* series (1974), Van Elk explores the function of the photograph by exploiting its characteristics (for example, *The Missing Persons-Lunch II*, 1976, 43 × 49 cm, Rabobank Nederland, R 051). He shows how seemingly honest images, produced by the supposedly objective camera, can easily be falsified through image-manipulating techniques. Except for some preliminary sketches, the art-making process in these works is out of the hands of the artist. He hires a photographer, asks people to act like diplomats in front of the camera, and when the photographs are printed he commissions a professional airbrusher to eliminate the person who appears to be the focus of attention in the picture. The subject matter of the *Missing Persons* series is not so much what is depicted — the picture could have been taken without the 'missing person'; it is the way in which it is depicted through manipulation that Van Elk uses to point out the absurdity of connecting the truth to a photographic image. This meaning is generated through the combination of the image and the techniques used. It is this interaction of the idea and its material visualization that is essential to Van Elk's work, and that is why he chooses his materials and techniques carefully.

Exploring artistic reality

While Van Elk chose a matt finish for most of the photographs in his work in the 1970s, for his series *Modern Flowers of 1982* he deliberately chose a glossy surface (for example, *Bouquet Anvers*, 1982, 118 × 115 × 7 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, A38880). He wanted to explore the artificial aspect of colour photography as opposed to the artistic reality of painting by juxtaposing both materials, to question the idea that a colour photograph is closer to the truth than a painting. On top of large colour photographs of exuberant bouquets of flowers, he dripped alkyd-based house paint in the style of Jackson Pollock to emphasize the painterly aspect as opposed to the 'artificial' nature of the glossy colour photograph. At the time Van Elk stated that the moment of expression in making these works was important to him because it, too, belonged to the concept. It is therefore surprising that now, when asked about possible discoloration of the photographs in these works, he proposes reproduction of the works similar to that carried out for *C'est moi qui fait la musique* and *The Adieu I* [4]. Knowing the artist's original intention, it is clear that scanning and printing the wildly painted chromogenic glossy photograph would drastically alter the meaning of this artwork.

Digital imaging

Scanning and digital manipulation are closely related to Van Elk's more recent working methods. He chooses modern reproduction techniques to depersonalize a painterly image, by scanning hand-painted collages in a professional photographic laboratory where the resulting image can also be manipulated digitally. The image is produced by a Lambda printer as a Cibachrome on clear polyester film. Finally, the transparent picture is sealed between two thick acrylic sheets (for example, *Lake Kinsel, Red Clouds (Transparency 1) K-97-6T*, 1997, 39 × 154.5 × 6.5 cm, Rabobank Nederland, P 833). With the 'clean' look of these works, Van Elk wants to tone down the personal and romantic quality of his landscape painting and at the same time make them contemporary.

CONSERVATION MATTERS

The materials and techniques employed by the artist contribute significantly to the meaning of many of Van Elk's works and furthermore they reflect the imaging techniques of the day. Unless, of course, the photographs have been replaced by reprints of a later date, because then all of the authentic characteristics are lost, and so is the connection to the time in which they originated. When the airbrushed layers and paint layers disappear as well, the materials cannot contribute to the meaning of the artwork any longer, nor can we see the artist's personal touch and the original working methods.

Copy?

The advantage of reproducing an artwork in cooperation with the artist is two-fold: the original artwork is left untouched and the artist's desires are known. But what are the consequences for art history? In the case of Ger van Elk, new artworks have been produced with more connection to the artist's present techniques than to those of 30 years ago. In a way this is fair, since they are copies of works of 30 years ago. But we should not let reproduction be a solution to the problem of discoloured artworks, because this not only undermines the whole idea of an artwork, but what we are actually doing is making new works that look like the original. And these are usually called fakes.

Prevent the problem

The problem of the discoloration of colour photographs cannot be solved, only prevented. This means an appropriate preventive

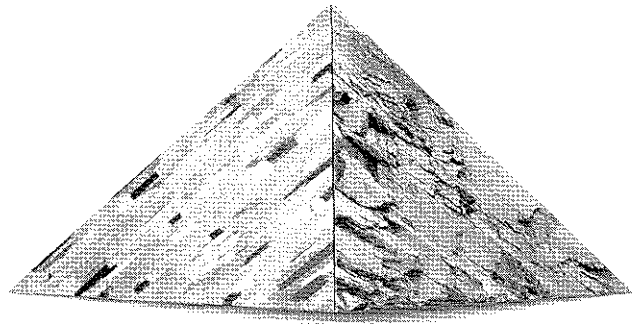


Fig. 3 Ger van Elk, *Roquebrune*, 1979, acrylic paint on canvas, chromogenic colour photograph glued on canvas, plywood, nails, piano hinge, 125 × 280 × 26 cm, Frans Hals Museum, mf/msch 79-1408. This work is out of balance because of the discoloration of the colour photograph on the right. Photo: Thijs Quispel, July 2003

conservation policy with low light levels for display and clean, dark, dry and cool (or cold) storage. As long as museums do not take these preventive conservation measures seriously, modern artworks with vulnerable materials like colour photographs will live short lives as 'fresh' artworks. The artwork will change fairly quickly, either by developing 'patina' or, apparently, by renewal through reproduction.

CASE STUDY: ROQUEBRUNE

What is the correct approach when an artwork has 'developed patina' as a result of the museum failing in its preventive conservation measures? Accepting the change might be one choice. But what if the discoloration alters the meaning? In the wall sculpture *Roquebrune* (1979, acrylic paint on canvas, chromogenic colour photograph glued on canvas, plywood, nails, piano hinge, 125 × 280 × 26 cm, Frans Hals Museum, mf/msch 79-1408), Van Elk juxtaposed the photographic image of an abstract pattern of a rock with a painted version of it. He arranged both images in triangular forms as partners, mirroring one another, so that a visual dialogue takes place. The colour balance between the painting and the photograph is essential to the meaning of the symmetrical sculpture, since it is from this equilibrium that the visual tension between the images arises. However, the colour photograph on the right side of the object, more than 20 years old, is severely discoloured (Fig. 3). Because of the poor condition of the photograph, the optical effect of the work is lost and therefore it is important to find a way to enhance its appearance.

It was clear that the artist would not object to replacing the original chromogenic print with a new one, even if, as in this case, the negative was missing. Digital scanning and manipulation, as carried out for *C'est moi qui fait la musique* and *The Adieu I*, was his preferred solution. However, this is a three-dimensional object where either the scanning device would have to capture the image from all sides or the original photograph would have to be flattened in order to capture the image completely. The latter option would destroy the original photograph and structure of the artwork, and with the first option (if indeed it was possible) all the retouching done by earlier conservators on the photograph would be scanned as well. It would no longer be a photograph of a rock, but a photograph of an old artwork.

Retouching with coloured light

An alternative to replacement of the original photograph was found in the choice of lighting. In a profile spotlight used in the theatre, four blades can be positioned in front of a lens in such a way that a triangular beam of light is formed. The photograph has a fairly monochromatic appearance and originally had an overall brownish tint. It contains little cyan (only in the black parts) and

the yellow has faded, so magenta remains to dominate the image. Lighting the discoloured photograph through a pale green filter (Lee, no. 138) would prevent the magenta from showing, because green light is absorbed by magenta and not reflected. Thus green light neutralizes the magenta that dominates the photograph, and as a consequence, the contrast in the picture is recovered. It gives the photograph a rather cool look but, combined with a straw-tinted filter (Lee, no. 113), the photograph is coloured brownish again, compensating for the faded yellow. With a UV-filter to protect the light-sensitive object from ultraviolet radiation, this filter combination gave a surprisingly good result, one which also pleased the artist. The photograph in *Roquebrune* is displayed at a light level of only 60 lux, which is acceptable for light-sensitive art objects.

CONCLUSIONS

The involvement of the artist in the conservation of his own work can be helpful, but one should be aware of the fact that an artist's views evolve; any solution will tend to suit their current ideas and these can differ from the original intent. To understand the meaning of an artwork and the artist's original ideas, an art-historical study is necessary, which should include the conservation history of the work.

Modern art is new and often consists of materials, such as colour photographs, so familiar to us that we are hardly aware of their transitory nature, and the unique quality of the original object as a whole. Museums with collections of modern art must take preventive conservation seriously, because a great many modern materials are vulnerable and will be subject to change. Once the damage has been done, it is difficult to find an appropriate solution, even (or especially) when the artist is involved.

Adjustments of display in the museum, rather than of the artwork itself, are not only necessary as preventive conservation measures but can have major potential in actual conservation

'treatments'. Retouching with coloured light while an object is on display is a much more sympathetic solution than the replacement of original material, which is the only vehicle of authenticity in an artwork.

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Lee Filters, Central Way, Walworth Industrial Estate, Andover SP10 5AN, UK, www.leeefilters.com

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