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Through the conservator's lens: from analogue photowork to digital printout. How is authenticity served?

Sanneke Stigter

ABSTRACT This paper explores the various notions of authenticity in relation to the life story of Ger van Elk's photowork *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973). The artist's collaboration with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam to remake the severely discoloured hand-mounted airbrushed photocollage from 1973 resulted in a high gloss digital printout. Questions of ethics and authenticity in the conflict of art and conservator values are explored through the conservator's lens, as an outside witness. The reader follows the conservator's thoughts and misgivings on the various stages of this negation. Clear communication to the audience on the artwork's fundamental new material structure is suggested as an essential measure to maintain generation of an authentic experience of the lived artwork.

Introduction

This paper examines the questions raised when an iconic artwork from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam was changed from an analogue photowork to a digital printout. In 2000, *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973) was remade in close cooperation with the artist Ger van Elk (1941–2014). The remake solved the problem of ageing and discoloured photographs revealing the original paint manipulation, but introduced significant differences in the work's material fabric and appearance as a result of a completely different art-making process. What can be learned from this artwork's life story in terms of authenticity?¹

C'est moi shows the young artist playing the piano with his tailcoat standing out straight and the grand piano bending backwards, perfectly following the triangular wooden frame (Fig. 1). As a typical conceptual artist, Van Elk outsourced the entire art-making process: he

employed a photographer to take his photograph and a professional photograph retoucher to do the image manipulation (Stigter 2002; De Jonge and Stigter 2003). Van Elk oversaw it all and signed the result.

It may be clear that the work's concept lies in the power of the artist as a manipulator of reality, echoed in the work's title, which is based on the French expression 'c'est le ton qui fait la musique' (it is the tone that makes the music): *C'est moi qui fait la musique*: 'I am the one setting the tone'. The artist's self-depiction leaves no doubt that he is able to convert reality, but how this was possible in this work was never clear at first glance; it was indeed startling to the viewer.

However, the work's hyper-real and magical appearance had suffered severely because of discoloration of the chromogenic prints, showing the airbrushed paint, which was meant to invisibly unify the photographs (Fig. 2). The artist had approached the Stedelijk Museum



Figure 1 Ger van Elk, *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973, 2000), airbrushed Cibachrome print, 60 × 120 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. (Photo: courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.)



Figure 2 Ger van Elk, *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973), airbrushed chromogenic prints, January 2002. (Photo: Sanneke Stigter/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.)

about this undesired effect, proposing to have the work remade. This was agreed upon and resulted in a collaborative creative process. Because the original negatives were missing, the entire artwork was scanned, digitally retouched and airbrushed anew (Van Oort 2001).

Reflective encounter

Why was I as a conservator so puzzled about this strategy? In January 2002, I encountered *C'est moi* in its two versions: the hand-pasted and airbrushed but clearly worn original from 1973, and the digitally reproduced machine

mounted version, which was meant to replace the former (Fig. 3). My perception of what constituted authenticity and the integrity of the artwork caused me concern.²

It is precisely the respect for historical and physical integrity that heads the list of obligations in the first international code of ethics for conservation (*Murray Pease Report: Code of Ethics for Art Conservators* 1968). Whereas these codes have been adjusted to better accommodate immaterial features of cultural heritage objects, for this work a material approach still dominated my thinking. The fact that time had affected the work's aesthetics seemed less of a problem as I was familiar with the discoloured nature of early chromogenic prints and



Figure 3 André van Oort examining the remake of *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (2000) and the original (1973) in front, January 2002. (Photo: Sanneke Stigter.)

accepted it as an inherent quality of the materials used. In the new version, on the other hand, the material fabric is definitely out of sync with what is expected from a photowork from the early 1970s, causing what Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe aptly called a ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Latour and Lowe 2011: 3).

Even as a ‘compensation for loss’, the new *C'est moi* hardly complies with professional codes of ethics since it is ‘obscuring original material’ and appears to ‘falsely modify the known aesthetic, conceptual, and physical characteristics’ (*AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* 1994: Guideline 23). However, a remake is fully reversible and does not harm the original physical object. In what way then did the new version affect our notion of authenticity?

Assessing authenticity

Authenticity is a complex notion. It may be considered as the quality of being genuine.³ What is considered genuine is based on values (Lemaire and Stovel 1993). This makes it a relative concept (Matero 2000: 6),

context-dependent (Dutton 2003) and shifting in meaning over time (Lowenthal 1999: 6). It is generally agreed that authenticity is a cultural construct (Jones 1992: 7; Matero 2013: 99).

Authenticity is a value that is situated in *relations*; for instance of the object in relation to time, to context, and its maker. Moreover, an artwork goes through the hands of many people that may partly ‘author’ the work again or anew when they are involved in its installation (Van Saaze 2009: 197). This means that when an artwork’s condition or concept forces museum professionals to do things that shape the work’s appearance, it gives them great responsibility. Indeed, it evokes potential authorship – a crucial phase in the life of an artwork as something conservation deals with and perhaps needs more tools for.

While the concept of authenticity is used as such a tool in decision-making, it is hardly a stable concept. Many forms of authenticity are discerned, which are, moreover, entwined (Ex 1993; Lowenthal 1989; Van de Wetering 1989). With so many notions of authenticity and different takes on it, it could be suggested that the idea of authenticity is employed at will, making its use as a powerful argument in decision-making almost arbitrary, a ‘dogma of

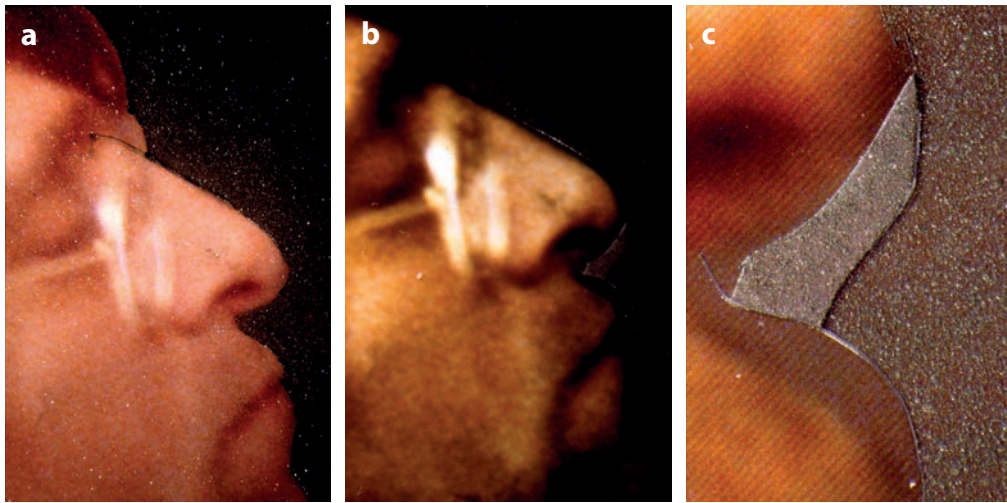


Figure 4 (a) Detail of the artist's profile 1973: chromogenic print with retouched highlight on glasses (original magnification 8×); (b) Detail of the artist's profile 2000: Cibachrome print of a line scan of the original (original magnification 8×); (c) Detail of the artist's nose 2000: cuts and pastes on Cibachrome print of the line scan (original magnification 40×). (Photos: Sanneke Stigter/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.)

self-delusion' (Lowenthal 1992), or 'fictional' (Muñoz-Viñas 2009: 38). However, it is functional for the discussion to assess authenticity in two poles in relation to the physical object: material authenticity and conceptual authenticity, while the notion of authentic experience is used in relation to the audience.⁴ Since authenticity is also developed in practice, a biographical approach is used to include the social, cultural and historical aspects to assess the work's changing features over time (Van de Vall *et al.* 2011) and to explore the question: how is authenticity served by the chosen conservation strategy for *C'est moi qui fait la musique*?

Material authenticity: losses and gains

As a result of the chosen strategy for *C'est moi*, many aspects of the initial artwork seem to have been lost, since they are no longer visible in its new appearance, causing a shift in the work's reading. The struggle with the original material to get the idea across has disappeared. The seams from collage elements have been digitally

erased and have vanished within the large digital printout. The uneven surface of the hand-pasted collage has made way for a machine-mounted print, which is glossy like a mirror. Moreover, the digital retouching represents Van Elk's preferred state of the work at a much later date, rather than its original colour balance for lack of scientific data.

Additional differences become apparent when both versions are examined under the microscope. The new print shows a particle under Van Elk's nose that must have come loose when making the mask for airbrushing, judging from the notches in the photograph's surface, changing the artist's profile (Fig. 4). These are small defects that represent traces in the new material fabric revealing the image's making process. Furthermore, different parts are airbrushed compared to the original. Superfluous airbrushed paint covers the subtle hand-applied graphic accents that stylised the image (compare Figs 5a and 5b). Moreover, the pixel grid of the line scan, a distinct digital scanning technique, disguises the original chromogenic dye clouds, the coloured spots that can be compared to the grains of a gelatine silver print (Figs 4c and 5c).⁵

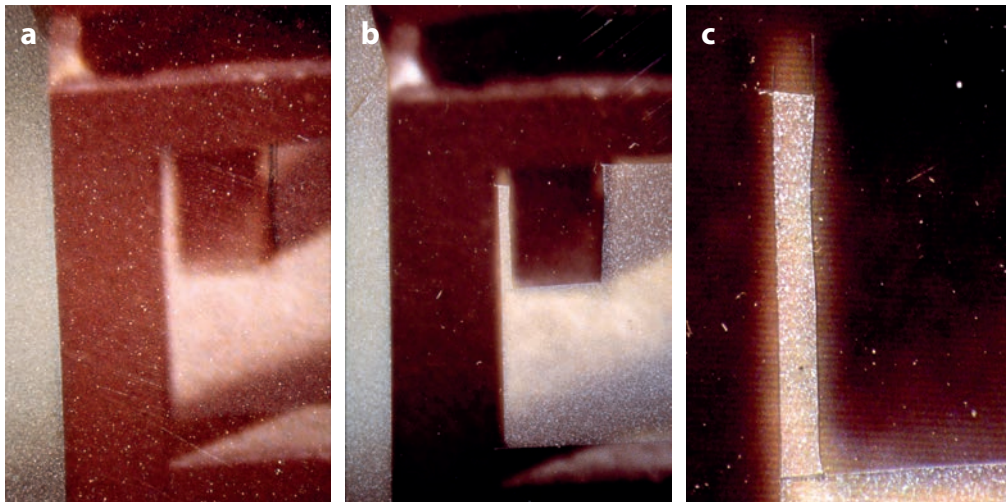


Figure 5 (a) Detail of a piano stool 1973: chromogenic print with graphic accent (original magnification 8×); (b) Detail of a piano stool 2000: airbrush on parts that were left open previously (original magnification 8×); (c) Detail of a piano stool 2000: cuts and pastes on Cibachrome print of the line scan (original magnification 40×). (Photos: Sanneke Stigter/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.)

The function of the new airbrushed paint layer, which once did the trick for the magical appearance of the image, has fundamentally changed. There is nothing to manipulate or to cover up in an already digitally manipulated image, except perhaps the glossy surface, which must have been screaming for a more ‘authentic’ appearance. However, the new layer of airbrush is no longer of structural importance to the image, but merely a veil of ‘artificial authenticity’ (Stigter 2004b: 55).⁶ While an attempt to bring the surface of the new print closer to that of the original, it is conveying its own reality as a new artistic concept instead. It seems as if Van Elk disregarded the original art-making processes as if it did not matter but when studied in the context of the artist’s oeuvre, the materials used are never insignificant. In his *Missing Persons* series (1974–75), for example, the use of airbrush on photographs even became the subject (Stigter 2004a: 106). Although *C’est moi* differs in meaning, the original art-making process does relate the work to its own context in time, something that is now lost to the viewer.

Then, what is gained? First and foremost, the artist’s considered ideal aesthetics for *C’est moi* in the year 2000. This means that time is

reflected through both material forms: one from 1973, through the discoloured chromogenic prints with airbrushed retouching, and one from 2000, through the smooth and glossy large Cibachrome print. This means that both versions represent the form of authenticity that Lowenthal relates to original context (Lowenthal 1989).

It is an odd but interesting combination, two image manipulation techniques from different eras: manually airbrushed paint and digitally manipulated pixels merging into the new *C’est moi* for a superficial link with the past, in an attempt to remake a lost authentic artwork. This material construction almost symbolises the reversed route of the whole undertaking, expressing its newness in 2000 style, ‘genuinely’ made by the artist and rooted in its own time. The deliberate choice for new materials and techniques demonstrates that there is no attempt made to imitate the original, which is immediately learned from the material expression of the new *C’est moi*: seam free and smooth as can be. Therefore, this may even be considered an honest strategy.

While initially considering it as problematic in relation to conservation that the spotless

one-piece print might have suited Van Elk's desire for a pristine quality, bringing it into the 21st century, the artist's personal input is expressed through this radical new form. It is sealed with his signature on the reverse, acknowledging his involvement at a later date. In fact, when using today's photographic techniques it would be pointless to cut up the large print into three separate parts and subsequently join them again to imitate the former collage; this would falsify the newness of *C'est moi* 2000. Indeed, authenticity is articulated as soon as an opposing feature (faking) pops up, while the new manifestation enforces its own authenticity.

Had the artist not been involved, this newly produced version would have been identified as an imitation. Only the artist's involvement assures that this version can be considered a remake, as an 'item made by someone other than the artist (though under licence?) resembling the appearance of the original superficially, but not necessarily its material or techniques' ('Terminology for Further Expansion' 2007). However, the work was first exhibited after its complete makeover without informing the audience about its status, which conflicts with the idea of authenticity as being genuine.⁷ This is also Van Elk's opinion – he indicated that he would prefer to have the new date included on the wall label (De Jonge and Stigter 2003).

For traditional artworks it is generally not accepted that artists should change the appearance of their work once it is out of their hands. Artists lack the conservator's ethical constraints and feel relatively free to do whatever they think is right for their work, without taking into account the artwork's history, the principles of reversibility and minimal intervention.⁸ Collaborating with artists could distract conservators from their ethical guidelines, as Tate's sculpture conservators Laura Davies and Jackie Heuman cautioned: 'we become willing participants ready to compromise on risks, we agree to alterations and sometimes overvalue the artist's wishes, we consider options that would be rejected as unethical if the artist were no longer alive' (Davies and Heuman 2004: 33). Having

the artist around to authorise a possible new version is certainly valuable when the development of an artwork is accepted. However, with non-variable material artworks this may conflict with traditional principles of conservation. This is why a remake offers interesting possibilities.

Apart from experiencing the artist's interference in conservation as a complicating factor, the artist's involvement is also an enriching opportunity to learn more about the work, while still possible. Latour and Lowe demonstrated that making a facsimile is a 'most fruitful way to explore the original and even help re-define what originality even is' (Latour and Lowe 2011: 8). In addition, when some liberty is allowed, a remake could also be a tool to explore the artwork's boundaries, with the artist's involvement as a safety net. The 'original' is, apart from being retired, not harmed by it, at least not physically, while the question is indeed pinpointed to the essence of the work's concept.

Conceptual authenticity: artist intent?

Van Elk's input for *C'est moi qui fait la musique* in fact resides in a technical and an artistic experiment, which notably suits the work's title. Therefore, the idea that the artist is setting the tone is still being narrated in the new print. It may be clear that this liberty in the work's remake could never have been allowed in terms of conservation without the artist's involvement, for this is a 'contained' work, in terms of the variable media approach, prescribing a restrained traditional conservation strategy and no reinterpretation (Depocas *et al.* 2003).

This is one of the reasons why an artist's later opinion or suggestion is always discerned from the artist's supposed original intent of the work. However, it is often debated whether we can fully know artist intent, or whether we even need to know it when we can also consider the artwork an independent work.⁹ The artwork's meaning may differ for each stakeholder and

depend on different interests. For example, it may have been of utmost importance for the Stedelijk Museum to display Van Elk's popular work more often. It was once the best-selling postcard from the museum's bookshop while the artist had sanctioned the work as no longer acceptable to put on display in its discoloured condition.¹⁰ Perhaps the museum's relation with the artist was at stake. These social factors are often underestimated in the way authenticity arises when a work is defined in a weighing of values during decision-making in conservation.

If the actual conservation object of *C'est moi* primarily consists of the 'magic' of the image, then it would be interesting to know what it was that triggered the audience's fascination, and whether that same sensation is achieved with the new version. Perhaps today's audience, so used to digitally manipulated images, is not that impressed, and understands the work's concept better through its 'vintage' materials, situating the work back in its time. Only then does the work's innovative character become apparent, precisely through the materials originally used. The archaic manual photographic retouching techniques can be discerned just because of the work's discolouration. Moreover, a worn appearance suggests a former glory, providing an idea about the way a work must have been experienced before, when people were still unable to 'see' the image manipulation in its non-discoloured state.

However, to put the work on display in its discoloured state means that the visitor perceives a historical object rather than a contemporary artwork. This reflects the difference of interest between the artist, who wants to keep the work up to date, and the museum, which also has a responsibility towards the work's history. It also illustrates different takes on authenticity, notably by authorities. The audience is rarely involved in these dilemmas, which is interesting, given that visitor experience is key.

The question is whether the new *C'est moi* still conveys the same message as in 1973. Although the 'wholeness' of the image is restored, it is pointless to seek for amazement through the surreal in photography with an

audience that is no longer impressed by manipulated images. Thus, not only the change in the physical artwork causes a shift in experience, the change in time does too, having ushered in a complete new visual culture.

Authentic experience: honest expression

If the idea of an artwork becomes outdated, it may perhaps suit its worn material better, when this can still hint at its initial meaning. However, if this were true, it could be equally argued that it is time for a new outfit, because we know that a worn appearance belongs to the work's age. Or is that falsification? Not if clearly communicated, as Van Elk did on the artwork's reverse (Fig. 6):

This work, *C'est moi qui fait la musique*, is made anew by me, by way of restoration, December 2000, and inseparably connected to the original execution. Therefore the new execution should be in the same frame and shown in front of the original.¹¹

The requirement of joining both images referring to the same artistic idea may make a fundamental difference for an authentic experience of the work – if the audience is made aware of this course of action.

This relates to another idea of authenticity, which is situated in the idea of the artist's presence being associated with traces of the artist's hand in the physical material. This is indicated as 'contagion' and defined as 'the belief that, through physical contact, objects can take on a special quality or essence' (Newman and Bloom 2012: 559). Although the artist's hand is hardly present in the original material, perhaps the answer to the question as to how authenticity is served in the new *C'est moi* lies partly in the fact that both versions are framed together. The idea that the former original is still physically part of what is presented might safeguard the work's cultic value, packaged in the whole structure. Moreover, the combined

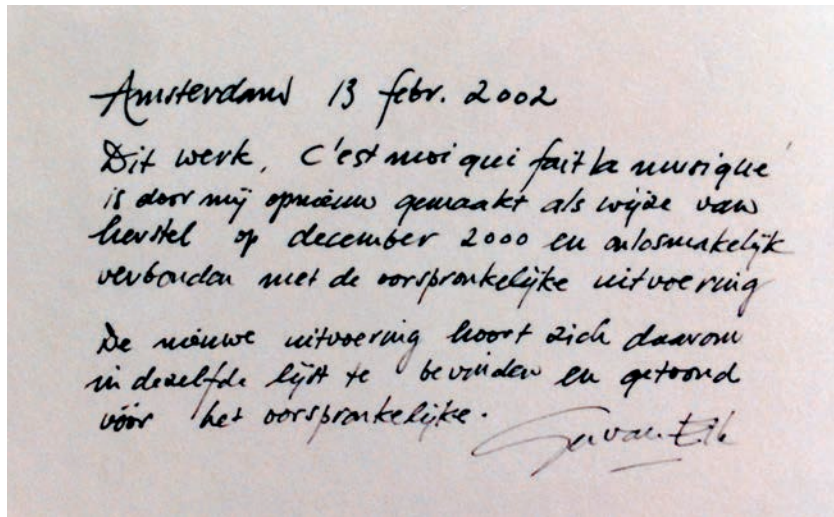


Figure 6 Ger van Elk's statement on the new *C'est moi qui fait la musique*'s reverse. (Photo: Sanneke Stigter/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.)

visual and physical dual structure is typical for Van Elk's way of working. The idea of stacking image, reality and imagination is prominent throughout his oeuvre and has become specific to *C'est moi* in its new structure.

Through this new form the work is still available to a wide audience and could be considered part of what Latour and Lowe have called the 'catchment area of a work of art', based on the idea of an artwork's trajectory as being composed of the various forms through which a work is communicated (Latour and Lowe 2011: 12). Even a work's aura is able to travel through these manifestations, depending on the quality of the work and contextual input, which includes informing the audience. After all, it is not only the factual traces in the material fabric that contribute to the expression of authenticity, but also the idea of the object being genuine, according to Van de Wetering's notion of authentic experience (Van de Wetering 1989). This almost suggests that authenticity is based on make believe, while it concerns concrete matter. This is precisely why honesty about what is being presented is so important. 'It is not a case of "either or" but of "and, and"', to quote Latour and Lowe once more, in specifying the

work's 'career' (Latour and Lowe 2011: 8). This means that the other part of the answer to the question on how authenticity is served in this case lies in clear communication.

Conclusion

Providing the audience with the full content of Ger van Elk's clarifying statement on the new physical condition of *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973, 2000) would both acknowledge the artist's new input and enhance the experience of authenticity, knowing that the real thing is there as part of what is seen on display. *C'est moi* consists of the former original, discoloured and overlaid with a new authorised print, embodying its former glory. Both parts show clear relations to the artist and the time in which they are made through their respective materials, qualifying them both as genuine. They have become the artwork in their combined structure. However, it requires clear communication to accept this, generating better understanding of the work's material status as a lived artwork, which is crucial to guarantee an authentic experience with the audience today.

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Notes

1. This paper is based on a chapter of my dissertation: *Between Concept and Material. Working with Conceptual Art: A Conservator's Testimony*, University of Amsterdam (forthcoming).
2. This was one of the cases that I studied as part of my final thesis concluding the post-doctoral training programme in Conservation of Paintings and Painted Objects, Specialisation Modern Art at the Limburg Conservation Institute: Stigter 2003.
3. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines authenticity as 'the quality of being authentic', while authentic is defined as of 'undisputed origin and not a copy; genuine' (www.oxforddictionaries.com).
4. I follow Rik van Wegen in using these as two poles in deliberations on the function of the physical artwork in relation to the idea (Van Wegen 1999: 206).
5. I thank photograph conservator Clara von Waldthausen for drawing my attention to this distinction between dye clouds and grains based on their chemical composition.
6. In Dutch: 'kunstmatige authenticiteit'.
7. This is what I recorded in my notes, but the Stedelijk Museum may later have changed its policy. The work has rarely been on display since then.
8. See in this context especially Sommermeyer 2010.
9. In relation to conservation see Dykstra 1996.
10. For the idea of the artist's sanction see Irvin 2005.
11. In Dutch: 'Dit werk, *C'est moi qui fait la musique* is door mij opnieuw gemaakt als wijze

van herstel op december 2000 en onlosmakelijk verbonden met de oorspronkelijke uitvoering. De nieuwe uitvoering hoort zich daarom in dezelfde lijst te bevinden en getoond vóór het oorspronkelijke.'

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