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## **Forever Young : the reproduction of photographic artworks as a conservation strategy**

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Concluding remarks

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This research started as a practice-based enquiry and it has drawn on real-life events as it studied the reproduction process of four photographic artworks in the setting of two Dutch contemporary art museums. In order to answer the main question, if reproduction can be regarded as a conservation strategy, I examined whether the various versions of the reproduced works were exactly the same or whether they differed from each other. And, where material, technical, and image dissimilarities were observed, it examined the possibility of whether these differences could be classified as constituent or contingent features. The term 'reproduction' defined the practice of substituting damaged photographic artworks with pristine ones. It was argued that reproduction generally does not comply with the material-based approach characteristic of traditional conservation theory and practice, in which materials are regarded as evidence of the past.

By introducing the theoretical framework of Genette, it was discussed that the reproduction of photographic artworks could only take place as the result of a convention. The substitution of one photographic artwork for another may occur if artists, museum staff, and society at large agree to dismiss some features as irrelevant and decide to ignore the fact that, during this process, these characteristics are replaced. In this view, reproduction may be interpreted as a reduction to the essential or constituent features, while other less crucial or contingent features are overlooked. Reproduction is simultaneously a subtractive and an additive practice as a number of properties are removed (subtraction) and replaced, substituted by others (addition). The subtraction and the addition of contingent features make an exact reproduction difficult to achieve.

By using Ginzburg's *paradigma indiziario*, it was argued that for conservators that are traditionally trained it might be problematic to ignore the presence or the absence of contingent features, as these properties give important clues to the way artworks were produced as well as insights into the condition of the works. Many conservators are trained to look and to give meaning through visual assessment to the material characteristics of objects. For these conservators, the material execution of a work is an essential component of the object's function and meaning. Hence, it comes as no surprise that several conservators may feel professional discomfort when a practice of substitution like reproduction is allowed, as this goes against the fundamental principles of traditional conservation ethics. This background of attentive examination, however, can be a source of knowledge, as it may help in the classification of constituent and contingent features of reproduced photographic artworks.

The attentive visual examination approach was mostly evident during the comparative analysis of the different versions of each case study. Every work was minutely described and technical features, physical properties, presentational forms,

and physical traces left behind by usage and time were recorded. While, at times, these accurate descriptions may have come across as tedious accounts of unexciting material details, by looking closely and comparing the versions, it has become clear that every print has its own specific properties, and that during the reproduction process only some of these properties were replicated while others were not. This insight supports my argument that photography is a multipliable medium, as it has the ability to multiply the image but it is unable to exactly replicate the material characteristics of each photographic work.

For the creating artists, the Stedelijk Museum, and the Van Abbemuseum, reproduction was a solution that enabled them to replace damaged or faulty museum objects with new pristine works. The substitution also prevented works of art considered unsuitable for display being presented to the public. By studying the reproduction of the four artworks, it emerged that the stakeholders involved in the decision-making were greatly influenced by the general ideas around photography and its alleged capacity to produce exactly the same photographs. This claim was perhaps most evident in the Baldessari case, where the museum and the artist agreed to reproduce the work without a direct comparison of the initial version. They believed that the reproduction was achievable from a distance: the photographs were printed in Los Angeles and the application of the dry transfer letters would have occurred in the Netherlands without direct supervision of the artist. Oddly enough, or perhaps precisely because of these preconceived ideas on photography's reproducibility, the reproduction ended on a sour note and the museum curators came to value the material aspects of specific prints more than they would ever have expected. As a result of these shifting ideas, the second version failed to reach the same status of the first one and the substitution between the two versions never took place.

The substitution of Dibbets' and Van Der Kaap's works did occur, albeit partially as the first version of each work was retained. The presence of a first version was pivotal for this research as it enabled me to make a comparative analysis of the versions, to tease out the differences, and to distinguish which are the constituent features and which are the contingent ones. However, the initial version heavily influences the way the artists and the museum staff tend to consider the subsequent versions. When the initial version is still available, there is a propensity to value this version more highly than the other ones. This was clearly noticeable in Dibbets' case, where the initial version, despite being deemed unsuitable for display, was still considered the 'original' work. This opinion clearly emerged in the way the artist signed the various versions and the way the work on the wall was dated. Dibbets considered the work's reprinting as a restoration treatment and, as such, there was no need to mention it on the label or other museum writings. It was Dibbets' belief that the material substitution

of a photographic object with other prints is a functional solution to the inexorable fading of colour photographs and that the reproduction of this work, a conceptual piece, should be regarded as the re-enactment of an idea, like LeWitt's and Weiner's works. The reprinting dates of 1996 and especially that of 2012 had to be hidden from the public. What counted most was a strict correspondence to the constituent features present in the 1973 version, while the artist did not want to impart much significance to the contingent features present in subsequent versions.

Van Der Kaap's idea about the dating of the work and what should be written on the wall label greatly differed from Dibbets' opinion. In fact, Van Der Kaap decided to add the reproduction date on the back of the second version of *Lalalalalight*, changing the inscription from '1989-90' into '1989-90-12'. For the artist, the museum label should give information about the work on display, about its technique, the materials used, and the date when the work was created and produced. In the case of *Lalalalalight*, the label should then report the date of the first creation (1989-90) as well as the moment of the second manufacture (2012).<sup>277</sup> Van Der Kaap considered his involvement in the reproduction and the changes made in the second version a valid reason to mention 2012 as part of the work's creative process. By adding the year 2012, Van Der Kaap acknowledged the 'making moment' of the second version as a significant event in the work's life.

For the artist, the first version of *Lalalalalight* still fulfils an important function, even if the work should no longer be put on display. This version retained a reference role for possible new versions in the future and was, therefore, worthy of being preserved in the museum repository. In this case, it is possible to argue that a shift occurred in the way the first version was valued by the artist and the museum staff, as it moved from having the status of an artwork to becoming a reference piece. In this case, too, the substitution was a partial one, as the first version was preserved. It is even possible to suggest that, in the future, a reverse shift might occur and that the first version might 'regain' its status as an artwork. This version was produced in a more durable and stable photographic technique than the second one and therefore it is not unthinkable that, if a colour fading of the second version ever occurred, the relevance of the first version might increase. A similar reversal happened with Dibbets' work: when *Comet Sea 3°-60°* was reproduced a third time, the second version devalued in comparison to the initial one.

The reprinting of *Xiada (Girls' dorm) Xiamen* is, in my opinion, also a partial substitution. This may appear a counterintuitive claim, as the first version was physically

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<sup>277</sup> Van Der Kaap artist interview, SMA.

destroyed and fully substituted by the second version. Despite the definitive action of cutting a photographic work to pieces, the first version of *Xiada (Girls' dorm) Xiamen* was not fully substituted by the second version. This case differs from the others as this photograph was created as a limited edition and not as a unique work. The existence of other two initial versions makes the substitution a partial one, as the second version, at least at a theoretical level, closely relates to the properties present in these earlier versions.

This case complicates the relationship among the versions since, right from the start, there are multiple initial versions. The classification of constituent and contingent features is not as well defined as in the other cases, where the works were initially conceived as unique. In a limited edition, the classification should ideally occur by comparing the various photographs that form the edition by means of an attentive visual examination. This approach might, however, be hindered by practicalities that influence the feasibility of the analysis or even obstruct it. As also discussed, *Xiada (Girls' dorm) Xiamen* differs from the other cases as the reprinting took place shortly after the first manufacturing of the failed piece. As a result, it remains unclear when exactly the reprinting took place and what decisions the artists took during the process. Moreover, the museum was confronted with the reprinting as *fait accompli* as it was not involved in the decision-making.

In the end, each artist may have his or her own ideas about the issue of reproducing their photographic artworks. Different artistic investigations as well as the art market may influence the way artists approach the subject. In my experience as a practicing conservator, and by taking into account the possible exceptions, artists are inclined to prefer a pristine work, rather than one that shows the signs of ageing. This attitude may explain why several artists have a 'pragmatic' attitude, adapting photographic materials and techniques to their artistic needs, as is the case for the works under study and as will be elaborated on in the coda.

Baldessari, Dibbets, and Van Der Kaap used photography as a vehicle for their artistic research and they welcomed the fact that photography is a multiple autographic medium and thus capable of producing more than one photograph. By reproducing their works, they were able to preserve and carry their artistic ideas into the future. The three artists used new photographic materials and they adopted, where possible, technological advances. Dibbets made a significant effort to match the new prints to the material of older photographs, but he used digital technology for the scanning of the 1973 analogue negatives. When Baldessari was asked to reprint his work a third time, he made clear to the museum curators that he would print the photographs using digital technology. Baldessari embraced the technological developments that have taken place in the photographic field and, at least in the beginning, he did not

## Concluding remarks

consider these changes an obstacle for the reproduction of *Virtues and Vices* (for Giotto). Van Der Kaap also decided to use a different photographic technique for the reproduction of *Lalalalight*, as the silver dye-bleach process he had used at end of the 1990s was no longer available. Ultimately, Van Der Kaap, who was well aware of the technical differences between the silver dye-bleach process and the chromogenic one, preferred the work's pristine condition, rather than presenting to the public something he felt unsuitable for display.

Today, the three artists are, to a greater or lesser extent, using digital photography for their needs. They tend to use the best of two worlds, rather than considering analogue and digital photography as two opposing fronts. As will be described in the coda, other artists are also experimenting with new forms of interactions. In these cases, too, artists are not interested in keeping the different technologies apart, but prefer to use the different technologies to their advantage.

Perhaps what the study of the cases has shown the most is that reproduction of photographic artworks is a highly complex process and its outcome is never certain beforehand. During the unfolding of the process, many predicted and unpredicted decisions had to be taken. The lack of certain materials and techniques, or damage to the negatives has deeply influenced the results. Insights have also changed along the way, as in the case of *Lalalalight*, when Van Der Kaap realized that the reproduction would not be satisfactory without the comparison of the first version. To be considered successful, reproductions need to comply with a certain number of constituent features. These were not always the same and varied depending on the specificity of the process. At the end of the day, this classification remains a value judgement and, as such, it is a subjective undertaking. The classification is not predetermined and it changes depending on the context, the people involved, and it might shift in time.

Because of the great number of choices and decisions that have to be made, it is my opinion that reproduction intended as a substitution for a photographic artwork can only occur under the supervision of the creating artist. In all the other instances, when the artist is not there to judge, the new work cannot function as a substitution as other individuals will have to take the decisions and, by doing so, they will influence the outcome of the reproduction. In these instances, it is possible to argue that the purpose of the reproduction is a different one as it intends to create a copy, rather than a new version of the work. I am aware that this claim is a personal standpoint and others may have different ideas on the matter. To me, artist involvement should be regarded as a constituent feature in order to legitimize the status of the reproduced photograph as a new version of a plural work. As discussed, the various versions of a plural work need to share a number of constituent features with each other. The number and the type of constituent features may fluctuate depending on the specific



case, but, in general, the authorship, the involvement of the artist in the decision making, the correspondence of the photographic image, and the dimensions of the work should be perceived as constituent features that need to be taken into account in order to achieve a successful substitution. The lack of one of these properties may negatively influence the way the reproduction is valued.

As argued, to consider a photographic work with more than one version a plural work has far-reaching consequences for its preservation and conservation. It means that all the versions are meaningful enough to be preserved and thus old, damaged versions are not to be discarded or physically eliminated. The substitution should be a partial rather than a definitive one. Museums should also be aware that the preservation of plural work demands a lifelong commitment and is a costly matter, as all the versions should be cared for and all the versions face the same restrictions about display and storage as other photographic materials.

This dissertation was broad in its scope, but it focused on the reproduction of four photographic artworks within the institutional setting of Dutch contemporary art museums. Furthermore, it analysed reproduction mostly from a conservator's perspective. There are at least five areas that may benefit from future research: 1) reproduction analysed from a curatorial as well as an art historical standpoint would be an interesting complement to this study. 2) It would also be engaging to broaden the field of research to other countries and examine how other museums with other cultural backgrounds and traditions deal with this topic. 3) The effect of digital photography, with its specific uses and conventions, on reproduction would also be an exciting subject for further research. 4) The influence of the art market and what the consequences for the economic value of the various versions might be is a fascinating theme. This raises questions about the reproduction of photographic artworks outside the museum context and how, in different settings, economic factors may have an impact on the way reproduction is practiced. It is not unthinkable that artists as well as collectors may be wary of allowing the existence of various versions of the same work. 5) The specific challenges posed by limited editions were briefly touched upon in this dissertation. The complexity of limited editions when these are reproduced is also open to more in-depth investigations.

To conclude, what I have learned most from this research is that material aspects are crucial to photographic artworks and therefore should not be neglected during the decision-making process. However, works of art are more than just their material properties and reproduction may overlook some features. But this practice also represents an opportunity to show to the public artistic elements that may otherwise vanish or be altered. Reproduction may not be the promised fountain of eternal youth that we all long for but, despite all the limitations, it does protract youth for a bit longer.

