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BETWEEN CONCEPT AND MATERIAL

DECISION-MAKING IN RETROSPECT CONSERVATION TREATMENT OF A SITE-SPECIFIC CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SCULPTURE BY GER VAN ELK

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Introduction

One of the case studies during the European research project 'Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art'¹ was 'The wider the flatter' a site-specific photographic sculpture from 1972 by Dutch artist Ger van Elk (1941 Amsterdam). The artist suggested replacing the old photographic material because of the poor condition. In addition he gave the liberty to adapt the work to any other site. This clear statement was made after 35 years and research into the exhibition history of the work revealed reasons to believe that the artist must have changed his opinion concerning this matter over time. What follows is a personal reflection on thoughts that occurred during and in retrospect of this research. The complex relationship between the use of material, location and the concept of the artwork is a recurring theme. Knowledge gained from the artist interview, the installation history and the opinion of different stakeholders was evaluated and influenced the decision-making. What can be learned from this experience in relation to the contemporary art conservation practice?

¹ *Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art* was a three-year research project supported by the Culture 2000 program of the European Union coordinated by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. See: www.inside-installations.org.

Artwork and condition

The artwork consists of a set of chromogenic photographs mounted on a triangular aluminium frame of ten alternating strips, each reflecting a wider angle from 90° to 180° that is flat. The sculpture is made to fit exactly into the corner of the beige painted stone wall in the Kröller-Müller Museum that is depicted on the photographs. The construction hangs in front of the very same spot that is visible on the life-size photographs in such a way that it covers the real area, replacing it with its depiction (fig. 1). 'The wider the flatter' thus has an essential visual relationship to its site, which generates the artwork's idea: the real angle is visually straightened out by the artwork. However



1. Ger van Elk, 'The wider the flatter', 1972/2007, chromogenic prints on RC-paper on aluminium, 6 x 270 x 134 cm. Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 107.781. Photo: Sanneke Stigter.



2. Discolouration and abrasion of gelatine layers on the 1976 chromogenic RC-paper with a silkscreen structured surface typical of the 1970's.

Photo: Sanneke Stigter.

The wider the flatter had lost its 'work-defining properties' (Laurenson 2006) because the photographs no longer colour matched the wall and their damaged surface distorted the illusion of the stone wall, hence the intended visual effect was lost (fig. 2).

Site-specificity and historicity

'The wider the flatter' could be labelled 'site-specific' because of the visual connection to its site, whereas initially there was no meaning embedded in the particular location. Therefore the term 'site-related' fits this artwork better. However architecturally the chosen corner



Fig. 3. Ger van Elk, *The wider the flatter*, 1972 in the Van Abbemuseum in 1973.

Photographer unknown, image from 35 mm slide, Kröller-Müller Museum archive.

does have a special feature because it is approached by steps which adds to the experience of the artwork enabling the spectator to see the alternating strips from above and below while passing. Another connection to the specificity of the site is related to time. 'The wider the flatter' was situated in that corner for so many years that a later loan request was turned down 'because it could only be displayed in the corner of the Kröller-Müller Museum for which it was made'². This shows how history attaches itself to the artwork despite the fact that it had a different appearance when it was first exhibited in the Van Abbemuseum (fig. 3)³. This was only for such a short period of time

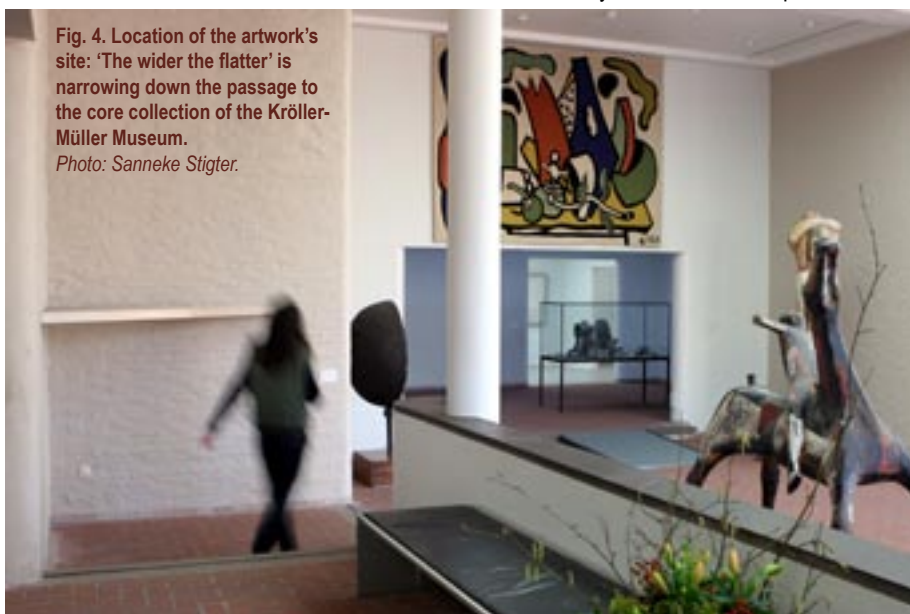


Fig. 4. Location of the artwork's site: 'The wider the flatter' is narrowing down the passage to the core collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum.

Photo: Sanneke Stigter.

² Note by Jaap Bremer, former curator of Kröller-Müller Museum, 1997.

³ January 5 – February 18 1973. See also Stigter 2005.

that the artist had even forgotten about it⁴. The current director of the Kröller-Müller Museum Evert van Straaten explains how the site can contribute to the meaning because of the fact that the work is located right in the middle of the museum on route to the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. Indeed 'The wider the flatter' physically narrows down the passage to the core collection. This means that the people on their way to see these paintings will be confronted with Ger van Elk's work first, whether they like it or not (fig. 4). Van Straaten remembers this aspect from the time when the work was first installed and is charmed by this idea, which connects to the way Van Elk's work is often about disturbing whatever is generally accepted in the art world⁵. These architectural, historical and functional connotations illustrate how different values could get attached to a site's specificity that are not necessarily intended by the artist, but do contribute to the meaning to the artwork and can be weighed during decision-making.

Preparation of artist interview

Ger van Elk is known for his provocative thoughts on traditional values in art and conservation. After the controversial treatment of Barnett Newman's 'Who's afraid of red, yellow and blue' that turned-out to be almost completely painted over to cover up the severe damage that was caused by an attack with a knife, he defended how the conservator in

question had acted faithfully in a Newmanian vein (Timmerman)⁶. It was argued that the concept of the red colour field was restored and the fact that the original oil paint layer had been altered drastically was claimed to be beside the point (Hummelen).

When the conservation history of some of Ger van Elk's own work is studied it seems as if he attaches absolutely no value to original materials and techniques in relation to the visualized image. This can be seen in his involvement in a conservation strategy that existed in replacing painted photographic work with a digitally processed copy enhanced by airbrush and some paint again, resulting in smooth and updated artworks (Stigter 2004)⁷. It is interesting to study this because it shows what is important to the artist with regard to these works, be it 30 years later. However I could not reconcile his disregarding of the original paint texture with the fact that the meaning in many of his work is often generated exactly through the material expression of certain techniques. He stipulates that he is not a painter⁸ but when he does use paint this is definitely in function of the meaning of the artwork⁹. Another important relation to technique is how Van Elk has always been fascinated by the developments in the photographic industry, which constantly offers him new possibilities to express his ideas, even with relation to his older concepts. It fascinates him 'to revive the experience of these works'¹⁰. In short: Ger van Elk seeks and keeps looking

for the best way to materialize his concepts².

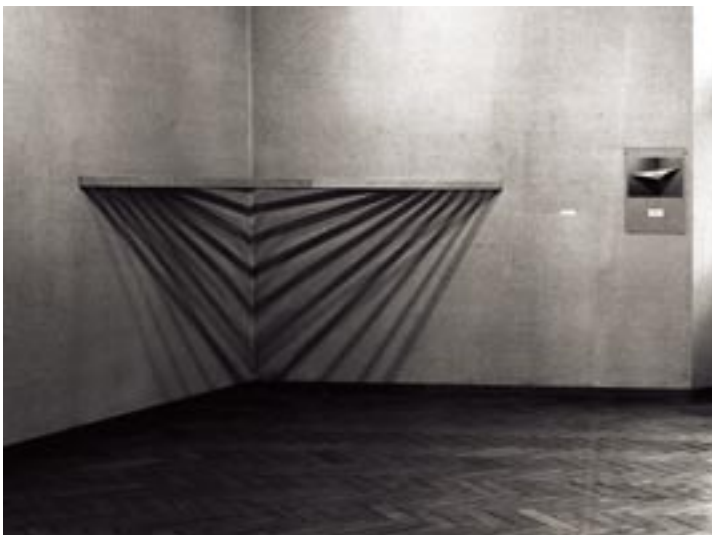


Fig. 5. Ger van Elk, *The wider the flatter*, 1972/73 accompanied by an explanatory picture in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1974. Photo: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, detail of negative number A12810.

Validation of artist interview

When the artwork has no fixed appearance or cannot have a fixed appearance because of ephemeral materials it is important to define the artwork's identity to be able to cope with conservation issues in the future. During the artist interview Van Elk made clear the conceptual nature of 'The wider the flatter' stressing the irrelevance of both a particular site and the original materials: "This will go anywhere. You can realize the concept wherever you like. The work is really only an illustration of the concept, the flattening out of 90-degree angle. That's the whole idea."¹¹ From the exhibition history however it could be concluded that the adaptation of the work for installation elsewhere never occurred after it had entered the museum collection. Former museum director Rudi Oxenaar had clearly stated that 'The wider the flatter' was made for the specific corner in the museum chosen in accordance with the artist and was never meant to be a temporary installation¹². Moreover it was the artist himself who had requested the work on loan for his one-man show at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1974 without considering changing the photographs. He had wished the work to be accompanied by an explanatory photograph of its site-specific situation in the Kröller-Müller Museum (fig. 5)¹³.

Conducting the interview I was struggling with what I thought to be the 'truth' judging these historical sources. I found myself looking for ways to get the artist on the same line as the historical facts in order to match the picture in

my head. Of course this was not going to happen. The artist's suggestion of remaking the photographs for the artwork was exactly as expected considering the conservation history of some of the other works from his oeuvre. But his suggestion of freeing the work from that specific museum corner was something that needed more attention.

Considerations on decision-making

The essential connection to the site where the artwork is to be installed is based on a visual unity. Whether this connection is created from the object's point of view or from the surroundings makes a fundamental difference in the approach of the conservation treatment and installation practice. The first interpretation stems from the assumption of the artwork being a static object, connected to a specific site, the second will merely consider the artwork as a concept in a material form that can be adapted to every other site.

The 'object-based approach' suits traditional conservation ethics rooted in a freeze-frame paradigm, stressing the fact that an artwork should be kept in one preferred state emphasizing authenticity embedded within the original material in which time and history are manifested (Brandi). Through the material characteristics the connection to time is read instantly, unconsciously even. The typical surface character of the silkscreen-structured photographic RC-paper on 'The wider the flatter' takes us back to the nineteen seventies instantly. The

⁴ Artist interview with Ger van Elk by Piet de Jonge and Sanneke Stigter in his former Amsterdam studio on April 4, 2003 as part of the project: 'Artists' Interviews / Artists' Archives' by the Netherlands Institute of Cultural Heritage and the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art. See: www.icn.nl and www.sbmk.nl

⁵ Personal conversation with Evert van Straaten, November 2, 2004.

⁶ Ger van Elk later said how he might have got this wrong. Personal conversation, February 13, 2002.

⁷ This was carried out for 'C'est moi qui fait la musique' from 1973 and 'The Adieu I' from 1974, both in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

⁸ Personal conversation together with Evert van Straaten, January 29, 2009.

⁹ This is very clear in the 'Missing Persons' series from 1976, based on visual power of airbrush techniques and the 'Modern Flowers' series from 1981, with paint drippings that refer to Pollock and painting in general.

¹⁰ From the artist interview April 4, 2003 – see note 4.

¹¹ See note 4, translated from Dutch by Helene Reid (for subtitles).

¹² Conversation by curator Toos van Kooten with Rudi Oxenaar, August 2004.

¹³ Letter from Edy de Wilde, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam to Ellen Joosten, Kröller-Müller Museum dd. November 8, 1974, archive Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

more than three meter wide photographs of one piece was quite unique at the time and by perceiving the artwork through this specific photographic material in combination with this extraordinary length the innovative use of materials is understood.

Fig. 6. Ger van Elk authorizing the new photographs while striking a pose, December 2006.
Photo Sanneke Stigter.



The 'conceptual approach' of 'The wider the flatter' would only fit traditional conservation ethics if the artwork had had an intense history of changed appearances from the start. Then it would have been clear that this was intended, added to the fact that there is no original material surface that needs to be preserved. Replacement of original material and remaking (parts of) an artwork does not really fit with traditional conservation ethics, whereas in contemporary art conservation, this seems to be practice in a lot of cases¹⁴. Generally this is far from the desired minimal intervention and could be a painful decision (Van de Vall). It makes a conservator readily 'use' evidence to justify a decision, especially when replacement is considered. In this case for instance the fact that the wall of the site had been repainted although in a similar colour, could claim the need for new photographs. In addition, the fact that the photographic paper had been replaced once before to resolve an early damage that had occurred in the mid nineteen seventies after the loan to the Stedelijk Museum also provided a certain liberty to ignore the present material.

Constructing history

When I started studying 'The wider the flatter' in 2003 I tended to stress the museum life of the artwork, the form it was given after acquisition, because so many sources emphasized this historical perspective. The former museum director who acquired the work, the artist's own involvement in the exhibition history that confirmed the Kröller-Müller version as a fixed form and further loan refusals made clear how this one site seemed connected to the artwork

(Stigter 2005). This actually illustrates how thinking about the artwork is constructed. Analyzing this line of thought also shows how this could be turned around when looked at it from a different perspective. The static history of the artwork could easily be re-written if different aspects of the artwork are emphasized. For instance I could have stressed the first appearance of the artwork, the fact that it once had a different location and consequently a different look, be it only for two months. Think of what would have happened if the artwork was not bought by the museum? Then it would probably have gained an installation history characterized by different appearances at every other location where 'The wider the flatter' were shown. What furthermore caused a change of perspective on my initial interpretation of the artwork's static history became apparent during the actual conservation practice. Although never mentioned in any historical source it suddenly became obvious how time and financial aspects could have directed towards a 'freezing' of the artwork in the Kröller-Müller form. After all the first loan request came only one year after acquisition and it would understandably have been a bit too much to ask to remake the photographs once more for a two-month exhibition after which the whole process would have had to be carried out once more.

The research activities during the Inside Installations project provided a framework that allowed reflection and critical thinking on the profession of the conservator of contemporary art. What actually determines the decision-making process when the artwork is constituted by abstractions such as 'idea' and 'ex-

¹⁴ These are issues that will be reflected upon in a new academic research project: 'New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art' initiated by the University of Maastricht, University of Amsterdam and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage.

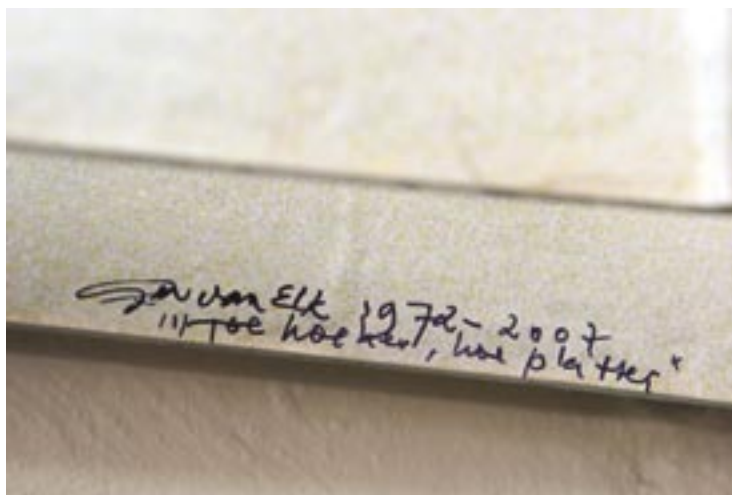


Fig. 7. Detail of the artists' new signature and clear view of the film grain in cyan, magenta and yellow dots that build up the colour in chromogenic photographic paper.

Photo: Sanneke Stigter.

perience'? Ideally the conservation treatment would be designed around a perfect balance of material as well as conceptual aspects, whereas in practice this is not always possible. Conventional conservation practice shows that the material aspects often still tend to outweigh the conceptual ones, probably to meet the requirement of reversibility. Once the original material is neglected a crucial source of information will be gone forever and with it a range of unexploited data (Van de Wetering). On the other hand the concept, so fundamental to art, is often at stake - even without knowing. A concept is no 'thing' that can be kept in storage to keep safe. Ideas may easily alter or get lost when not documented well enough. The idea needs to be understood and remembered and therefore documenting the artist's intention as a result of art historical research and the artist interview has become common practice as part of contemporary art conservation.

Conservation and reinstallation

From the interview with Ger van Elk we know that for 'The wider the flatter', according to him, the specific location is not important as long as the photographs correspond visually to the spot in the corner where the work is installed. In accordance with the artist and the museum director it was agreed to design the conservation treatment and reinstallation around the old Kröller-Müller site because it was still there.

However it needs to be stressed that this is not an imperative, just the option that suits certain historical and contextual values that address the experience of the work.

Conservation treatment of the old chromogenic prints was considered impossible to the degree that they would exactly colour match the wall to achieve the desired effect. Retouching with light was not an option because of the artwork's complex structure. In close consultation with a photograph conservator and a photographer new photographs were made and authorized by the artist (fig. 6). The old photographs were consolidated and cleaned so that the new photographs could be adhered on top of the old ones in a reversible way. The conservation treatment was carried out during the exhibition 'Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art'¹⁵. The conservation research questions were communicated to the visitors and the actual conservation treatment could be experienced on site. After reinstallation the artist signed the work with the date of the concept and the date of the new materialization (fig. 7).

Look and feel

Now that the 'original' site was chosen for reinstallation it was decided to stay as close as possible to the original material and techniques to generate a similar 'look and feel' as to when the work was first installed in the

¹⁵ October 25, 2006 - January, 7 2007 and March 21st, 2007 - June 3rd, 2007, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Kröller-Müller Museum. This idea of 'look and feel' is sometimes referred to when migration is part of the conservation strategy (Laurenson 2007) but this is not a widely used term in art conservation. It is used with reference to the image quality of projection in film conservation (Meyer). 'Look and feel' describes the more intangible aspects of artworks and refers to the experience rather than the art object itself. A decision based on the 'look and feel' of something seems rather unscientific because of its subjective connotation. This is why I found it hard to relate the idea of 'look and feel' to conservation practice at first, apparently blinded by the traditional 'object-based approach' and the associated decision-making that is traditionally based on nothing but the 'objective' truth about the object. I now realize that the way in which scientific research is translated to conservation practice is always subjective because it is based on choices by human beings. The description of 'look and feel' is actually rather suitable because it provides transparency to the fact that choices are made and that new materials are used and manipulated, aiming for an 'authentic experience' rather than representing the 'authentic object' since this is long gone anyway, changed for ever by time and history.

Conservation strategy

A mechanical technical camera with film was used followed by analogue enlarging and printing on chromogenic RC-paper. The silkscreen-structured paper that was used originally is no longer commercially available, but a similar matte surface was chosen so that the photo would blend into the wall as intended¹⁶. The film grain can be clearly distinguished in the cyan, magenta and yellow dots that build up the colour in a traditional analogue chromogenic photograph (fig. 7). These features can only be generated as long as the photographic industry provides large format chromogenic paper and analogue printing techniques and that is not going to last. Therefore extra prints from the same batch are kept in cold storage. However because of discolouration when on dis-

play new photographs will eventually have to be made. In the future new choices will have to be made for suitable photographic techniques and materials. This could actually be a good moment to consider a new location for 'The wider the flatter' as well, so that the material change and location change could be carried through as a whole. This is not an imperative, but just an idea of a move in conservation / re-installation strategy and a suggestion for a new chapter in the life of the artwork with respect to something like a 'conceptual-material unity'.

Spin-off

In the meantime Ger van Elk seems to have been triggered by the discussions on conservation during the artist interview and he is now thinking of picking up the idea of 'The wider the flatter' for a new series of work. He is intrigued by the fact whether this might be 'not done' while only signing the work according to the date of its conceptualization in 1972 without the addition of the current date. At the same time it would be obvious from its new contextual and material form, provoking the whole idea of material authenticity¹⁷. This proves the assumption that even in this case the material form does contribute to the idea of Ger van Elk's work or at least inspires the conceptualization of his work. Apart from that it would be the perfect visualization of the tension between the conceptual message and the material form stirring the decision-making process in contemporary art conservation!

To conclude

An artwork that is manifested in a material form has been shaped based on choices made by the artist at a certain period in time, even if the work is merely a concept. Why a certain form or manifestation was chosen and how this contributes to the concept (or history) is of essential importance in order to understand the dialogue between concept, location and material of the artwork. The research around the conservation and reinstallation practice of Ger van Elk's 'The wider the flatter' has shown that information from various historical sources, per-

¹⁶ Artist interview April 4, 2003, see note 4.

¹⁷ Personal conversation February 25, 2009.

sonal opinions and technical (im)possibilities can be consciously employed during the decision-making according to the interpretation of this dialogue. Acknowledging this shows how an open approach is needed to allow reflection on the conservation and reinstallation practice of contemporary art. Considerations during conservation or reinstallation practice should be made transparent in documentation recording the the artwork's life: its history the consequences for the future. After all eventually the artwork will be shaped by the choices made by the museum and the conservator at certain moments in time, especially if the work is merely a concept.

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