## Documenting the Analogue Past in Marijke van Warmerdam's Film Installations

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# DOCUMENTING THE ANALOGUE PAST IN MARIJKE VAN WARMERDAM'S FILM INSTALLATIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

Dutch visual artist Marijke van Warmerdam is best known for her film-based installations, which present simple settings or actions, such as a girl performing a handstand, in short, 16mm film loops that are projected in the gallery space. In 2011 van Warmerdam took the decision to digitize most of her film installations. From a conservation perspective this is remarkable, since the disappearance of the analogue 16mm projectors from the gallery space significantly alters the experience of van Warmerdam's film-based works. However, with reference to recent ideas from performance studies, in particular the notion of "dramaturgy," I argue that there is no inherent difference between the analogue and digital versions of her installations. The case serves to explore a more radical freedom of interpretation in the execution of time-based media installations and proposes a perspective on documentation that shares responsibility among all different stakeholders, extending the "ecosystem" of time-based media conservation beyond the museum's walls.

**KEYWORDS**
ANALOGUE FILM | DIGITIZATION | PROJECTION | FILM INSTALLATIONS | MARIJKE VAN WARMERDAM

**RESUMO**

A artista holandesa Marijke van Warmerdam é sobretudo conhecida pelas suas instalações de filmes que apresentam situações ou ações simples, tais como uma rapariga a fazer o pino. São instalações de filmes de 16mm em *loop* projetados no espaço da galeria. Em 2011, van Warmerdam decidiu digitalizar a maior parte dos filmes das suas instalações. Do ponto de vista da conservação, isto é notável uma vez que a ausência, no espaço da galeria, dos projetores de 16mm analógicos altera significativamente a experiência das obras em filme de van Warmerdam. Contudo, baseada nas ideias recentes do âmbito dos estudos de performance, em particular a noção de "dramaturgia", defendo que não existe diferença fundamental entre as versões analógicas e digitais das suas instalações de filmes. O caso serve para explorar uma mais radical liberdade de interpretação e de apresentação de instalações de *time-based media* e propõe uma perspetiva, sobre a documentação, de partilha de responsabilidade entre os diferentes *stakeholders* alargando o "ecossistema" da conservação de *time-based media* para além das paredes do museu.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**
FILME ANALÓGICO | DIGITALIZAÇÃO | PROJEÇÃO | INSTALAÇÕES DE FILME | MARIJKE VAN WARMERDAM

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## Introduction

In 2011 the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam organized a monographic exhibition dedicated to the work of the Dutch artist Marijke van Warmerdam (born 1959), entitled *Close by in the distance*.[1] Van Warmerdam is best known for her film-based installations, which present simple settings or actions, such as a girl performing a handstand (*Handstand*, 1992), in short film loops that are projected in the gallery space. The exhibition also included a selection of non-filmic works, such as photographs, prints, and sculpture. On the occasion of the retrospective, her film-based works were digitized by EYE Film Institute Netherlands; in the exhibition they were for the first time shown as digital projections.

In this article I investigate the transition from analogue to digital film projection in van Warmerdam's work. First, I will focus on her oeuvre and the role of analogue film in it. Then, I will discuss the digitization on the occasion of the 2011 exhibition, and investigate to what extent the transition to digital impacted the appearance, meaning, and interpretation of these works. What, exactly, is lost? How are we to document the analogue origins of Van Warmerdam's work, and how are we to "perform" this documentation in the future conservation and exhibition of her works? In order to answer these questions, I refer to the field of performance studies, in particular the conceptualization of dramaturgy as both the composition of plays and the process that generates the composition in the play's performance. Based on this analogy with theatrical performance, I argue for a more radical freedom of interpretation in the execution of time-based media installations. Finally, with reference

to ideas from the field of memory studies, I propose a perspective on documentation that shares responsibility among all different stakeholders, extending the "ecosystem" of time-based media conservation beyond the museum's walls.

## Marijke van Warmerdam

Marijke van Warmerdam was trained as a sculptor at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and in New York and Berlin, and lives and works in the Amsterdam area. Characteristic for Van Warmerdam's work is the fact that her films lack any form of narrative. The films focus on simple, everyday actions or settings, such as the swirls of milk poured into a glass of water (*Dream Machine*, 2006), a man taking a shower (*Douche* [Shower], 1995), or the white condensation patterns that airplanes leave behind against a deep blue sky (*Skytypers*, 1997). In addition, Van Warmerdam realizes unreal or fantastic scenarios in her films, whereby simple objects become involved in a strange occurrence, such as a hat dancing in thin air (*Le retour du chapeau* [The return of the hat], 1998); parrots turning a somersault on their perch (*Rrrolle — Red*, 2011, and *Rrrolle — Blue*, 2011); or a storm with rain, lightning, and hail breaking out over a bathtub (*Weather forecast*, 2000). Because of the complete lack of narrative, your eyes are drawn to the formal arrangement of the images, their colors, pattern, and rhythm — their emphasis on the elapse of time.

Because of its documentary, observational nature, Van Warmerdam's work is close to life. As the artist herself says, "I like art especially when it is mixed with life. Art can give a twist to life and vice versa. I really enjoy it when a work

[1] *Marijke van Warmerdam — Close by in the distance*. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 29 October — 22 January 2012.

comes very close to life and almost merges with it but stops just short."[2] Her works foremost invite us to focus on minor details of reality, settings, objects, or simple, everyday actions that we normally overlook. She uses the highly constructed setting of a film shoot to highlight the beautiful and miraculous aspects of reality, such as the drops of water dripping from the inside-out pockets of a boy's swimming trunks in *Lichte Stelle* (2000).

Van Warmerdam uses film, but she considers herself a *visual artist*, not a filmmaker. In an artist's interview conducted in 2003 and 2004 with Jaap Guldemond (then curator of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) and Mark Paul Meyer (curator at EYE Film Institute Netherlands), she indicates that her film-based works are deliberately created for the gallery space, instead of the black box of the cinema theater (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 139). The artist emphasizes the sculptural character of her work: the looped film, the projector, the projected image on the wall or screen, and the positioning of the installation in the room are all part of the entire work and enter into a relationship with the space in which it is exhibited (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 141). Rather than in the traditional cinema theater, where the projection setup is hidden from view, then, her works should be displayed in galleries that are sufficiently lit to be able to distinguish all elements of the installation.

The use of space in Van Warmerdam's film installations can be roughly divided into two categories. First, there are installations that immerse the viewer in the work, such as *Kring* (Circle, 1992), a film portraying a circle of people recorded at a square in Marrakech by a rotating camera, which is projected on the four walls of a room by a rotating

16mm projector placed on a pedestal in the center of the room. The fact that the rotating projector mimics the rotation of the camera generates a flashlight effect, lighting up the people as the projector moves around. This setup encompasses the viewer and evokes the impression that one is being observed by the people portrayed (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 143). A second category comprises works projected on screens or walls installed in a larger space, where the viewer can walk around them, as in the case of *Vliegtuigen* [Aeroplanes] (1994) (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 141). Besides the use of space, another element that determines the sculptural character of her work is the size of the projection. *Kring*, for instance, should ideally be projected with the film image having a projection height of 240 cm, so as to make the people portrayed appear life-sized. In addition, Van Warmerdam prefers the image of *Kring* to start on the floor, to "ground" the people portrayed, as it were. So, in many cases the decision to "ground" the projections creates a fluid transition between the reality of the viewer and the filmed reality. This is the case in *Handstand*, where the lower part of the image also depicts a floor (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 143).

**Digitizing Van Warmerdam's Film Installations**

As Van Warmerdam explains in the artist's interview, she prefers the photographic quality of the film image above that of video because of its higher and more stable image quality. Yet, by the time of her solo-exhibition at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in 2011, the quality of digital images had improved to a degree that for her it very nearly approached that of analog film. Also, it has become increasingly difficult

to find the hardware needed for the analog projection of her works: the EIKI 16mm film projectors with xenon lamps that she prefers can only be found with great difficulty in second-hand markets, and have become quite expensive. A third factor is the disappearance of the expertise required for operating analog projection technology: Ruud Molleman, the technician who was responsible for most of the technical modifications made to Van Warmerdam's projectors, has recently retired (Monizza 2013: 74).[3] So by the time of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen show, where 20 of her film loops were to be projected, Van Warmerdam was more or less forced to find a different solution (Monizza 2013: 69-70 and 73).

In preparation for the exhibition, EYE Film Institute Netherlands digitally transferred and restored several of the artist's film loops. After a long process involving the artist; curators at two museums (Stedelijk Museum and Boijmans van Beuningen Museum); collection specialists at EYE; technicians at the projection equipment provider Beam systems; technicians at Cineco laboratories for film scanning and grading; as well as different technical solutions and equipment, the films were eventually presented in the form of Apple ProRes HQ 422 files, played with QuickTime, and projected using Panasonic PT-DZ570E projectors, which were hanging suspended from the ceiling or, in the case of *Handstand*, positioned on the floor (Monizza 2013: 77).[4]

In the 2003/2004 artist's interview, Marijke van Warmerdam already indicates that she could imagine a future where a work like *Handstand* will be shown as a digital projection. She says that, in such a case, it would not make sense to emphasize the physical presence of the projector

with a pedestal, since a lightweight beamer does not require the sturdy table an analog film projector needs, and thus there would be no logical connection between the two. She also clearly indicates that the sound of the projector is not important to her: she does not consider it an essential part of the work. Moreover, she indicates that maintaining the sculptural aspect of her works is important, but that this can be achieved by other means — emphasizing the visible and audible presence of the projector is not a requirement to achieve the sculptural presence of her film installations (Guldemond and Meyer 2012: 144).[5]

For curators, conservators, and conservation theorists this is quite a striking view, since the disappearance of the 16mm film projectors in the 2011 exhibition, including, in most cases, their visible presence and the characteristic noise they produce, significantly alters the aesthetic experience of Van Warmerdam's works. However, as we will now see, from the perspective of contemporary performance theory, Van Warmerdam's decision to go digital makes perfect sense.

## Time-based Media Installation as Performance

The Van Warmerdam case demonstrates what has been pointed out by numerous authors who have investigated the challenges posed to museum practice by time-based media art: namely, that these works are process-based, composite, and variable over time and space (see, for example, Grau 2007; Paul 2008; Shanken 2009; Graham and Cook 2010). Time-based media installations like those of Van Warmerdam fit in a tradition of works that cross-over between cinema, painting, and installation and that create a sense of "theatricality," in that they transcend the boundaries of

space and incorporate a dimension of time (Valentini 2009: 54). In conservation theory, it has been recognized that one needs to reconceptualize the paradigms for each of these disciplines in order to develop a coherent framework for their long-term preservation (see, for example, Noordegraaf et al. 2013).

In the field of time-based media installations, inspiration for the reconceptualization of their conservation and exhibition has been found in the performing arts, in particular by recognizing that each exhibition of these works should be seen as an execution of the script or score that defines their core components (Laurenson 2006).[6] Researchers have shown how these works challenge the traditional "hands-off" or preventive approach of traditional conservation and require a more interventionist approach, recognizing the fact that the conservation of installation art, like the production of theatrical or musical performances, is an ongoing process, involving multiple actors and perspectives (Van Saaze 2013). As Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research at Tate, has pointed out, most contemporary time-based media artworks depend on a complex "ecosystem" for their production and distribution that extends beyond the walls of the museum: "There is a point where the conservator cannot develop all the in-depth expertise demanded by these works and a more distributed model is needed, supported by new alliances both inside and outside the museum" (Laurenson 2013: 41-42).

In the case of Van Warmerdam, the analogy with the performing arts is useful to understand the impact of digitization on the meaning and appearance of her film installations. In particular, the notion of "dramaturgy" can help to conceptualize the composition of Van Warmerdam's installations as the result of a collaborative practice of human and non-human (technical) actors, and to distinguish between those elements that belong to the works' core, and those that may be subject to change.

Contemporary approaches to dramaturgy define the concept as referring to a play's or performance's composition or structure — the constellation of elements that gives the play its appearance and meaning. Besides, it is also conceived as a process: an activity that concerns an engagement with the work's composition. In the words of the British theatre studies scholars Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, dramaturgy as an activity refers to the "engagement with the actual practical process of structuring the work, combined with the reflective analysis that accompanies such a process" (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 3). Although in many cases, especially in continental Europe, the creation and analysis of the composition of a play involves the work of a professionally trained dramaturg, Turner and Behrndt emphasize that this professional role does not coincide with the notion of dramaturgy as the compositional aspect of performances: a play always has a dramaturgy, even if no dramaturg was involved in its production.

Important for our purposes is the fact that dramaturgy as defined in performance studies distinguishes between the composition of a play-as-script and the composition of the play-as-performed. Turner and Behrndt, with reference to the work of the French theatre studies scholar Patrice Pavis, stress that "the performance must be considered as an independent occurrence, which cannot be explained as a realization of authorial (or directorial) intention" related to

[6] See also Richard Rinehart's unpublished paper (2005), "A System of Formal Notation for Scoring Works of Digital and Variable Media Art", http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about/formalnotation.pdf.

the script: "In analyzing performance, we cannot assume that the script exists in causal relationship to the event" (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 6). Consequently, dramaturgy is tied to two different temporalities: the dramaturgy of the play text remains more or less the same and transcends space and time, whereas the dramaturgy of the play in performance is a unique live event that is always situated in space and time.

Additionally, the notion of dramaturgy is useful in recognizing that the production of complex works and their performances are collaborative activities, in which the activities of all actors involved affect the appearance and structure of the resulting work: "All theatre and performance makers whose work provokes or suggests new compositional strategies are involved in changing dramaturgies" (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 6). Recognizing that dramaturgy, understood as the composition of an artistic work, is the result of a collaborative activity, in combination with the distinction between the play-as-script and the play-as-performance outlined above, also allows us to reconceptualize the role of artistic intent in the execution of works: it prevents an automatic transposition of the intention of the play as written by its author to the play as performed by a specific group of theatre makers at a given time. In fact, in theatre the interpretation of a play at each new performance is critically evaluated for the ways in which it manages to translate the original intention of the text to the contemporary context in which it will be seen and heard.[7]

The conceptualization of the composition of time-based media artworks in dramaturgical terms allows for change, and, rather than emphasizing what is lost, stresses the value of what is gained in adapting scripts to the ever new ways in which we see and read the world (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 6). In this sense, a dramaturgical perspective does more justice to the actual practice of installing and experiencing new versions of time-based installation artworks. For example, the Dutch conservation science scholar Vivian van Saaze describes how the decision to replace the three television monitors originally used for the installation of Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas' work *25 Caramboles and Variations: A Birthday Present for a 25 Year Old* (1979) with three flat-screen plasma screens for the 2003 installation of this work, may seem quite controversial from a traditional conservation ethics perspective (2013: 15). However, if seen from a dramaturgical perspective, this decision makes perfect sense. The artist himself, who was involved in the reinstallation, indicated that he preferred his work to evolve with developments in technology, so preferred the "present-day feel" of the installation with the flat-screens (Van Saaze 2013: 14). In addition, the "obviously anachronistic approach" was not noticed by audience nor press (Van Saaze 2013: 14-15), another indication that the installers succeeded in the realization of a dramaturgy that meets contemporary expectations. Moreover, such a perspective does not preclude a performance that deliberately emphasizes the historical context in which a work originated: as long as the historical technology remains available and can be kept in working condition, it is possible to realize a "historical adaptation" of the work. This is no different for media art then it is for the performing arts, where, for example, for an execution of the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, one can choose between Marius Petipa's 1890 classical

[7] In her seminal text on authenticity in time-based media artworks, Pip Laurenson has already used the model of two-stage art forms such as theatrical or musical performance to conceptualize the realization of time-based installation works of art as the result of, first, their conception by the artist, and, second, the act of installing the works (2006). However, whereas Laurenson maintains a role for the artist/author in defining the "work-defining properties" that are transposed from the artist's conception to the installed version, the concept of dramaturgy as presented here even more radically liberates performed instances of artistic work from the author's intent.

choreography or Mats Ek's 1996 reinterpretation of the work, staging the princess as a heroin addict.

Looking back at Marijke van Warmerdam's case from the perspective of dramaturgy, then, the analogue and digital versions of her 16mm film installations can be seen as two different executions of the same script. The fact that the analogue origins of the works are obscured in the 2011 exhibition does not pose a problem for the artist, since the photographic and sculptural quality she desires for her work can also be realized with current digital technology. From a film theory perspective, as I have argued elsewhere, the phenomenological qualities that are central to the work can also be maintained in digital projection (Noordegraaf 2014). And, as with the Cárdenas case described above, audiences and critics did not perceive the change in the visual and aural appearance of the original installation and highly appreciated the 2011 mise en scène, with the works projected on seemingly floating screens in the museum's large exhibition hall.[8] Finally, from a conservation point of view, one can argue that the technology used for the digital versions of the film-based works does not belong to their "work-defining properties" (Laurenson 2006), which means they can easily be replaced by similar ones — provided that the overall ensemble of projection, screen, and equipment looks good. However, this is different for some of Van Warmerdam's other installations, where the sculptural quality that she values so highly would be severely compromised if projected digitally. An example is *Kring*, where the rotation of the projector mimics that of the camera and thus directly refers to the original setting of the analog recording — in this case, the projector is part of the work's core.

What remains, however, is the question of the extent to which the analogue origins of Van Warmerdam's work have to be documented, in order to ensure that later executors of the "scripts" of her film installations have something on which to base their decisions. Or, in more general terms: how much documentation is required for deciding which dramaturgy is relevant for a specific performance of the work, and how do we ensure that the history of performances is not forgotten? That brings us to the last section of this article, on the performance of documentation.

## Performing the Documentation of Time-based Installation Art

Conservators and conservation scientists have long recognized that, because of their reliance on technologies that are subject to rapid obsolescence, time-based media installations rely for their survival on documentation of their creation, exhibition, appearance, functionality and experience. For many conservators, creating extensive documentation provides the promise of being able to capture some of the processual and fluid nature of these works (Dekker 2013: 149). In the past decades, therefore, various museum curators and scholars have joined forces in developing elaborate models for documenting time-based media installations, such as the Variable Media Questionnaire developed by the Variable Media Network, the guidelines developed by the Matters in Media Art project, and the Media Art Notation System developed by Richard Rinehart (all discussed in Dekker 2013). The strength of these models is that they identify those elements of a work that are critical to its function. This can include, for example, the way visitors

[8] As in the review of the exhibition by Joost Zwagerman. 2011. "Beschouwing: De tentoonstelling Dichtbij in de verte van Marijke van Warmerdam." *De Volkskrant*, 21 December.

interact with a work, in which case a video registration can serve as documentation of the desired functionality.[9]

At the same time, it is clear that documentation will always give only a partial and sometimes arbitrarily chosen perspective on the original work. The response of conservation scientists has been to develop increasingly fine-grained models for the documentation of performance-based works, such as the three-tiered model for the documentation of the work of the British performance group Blast Theory by Annet Dekker (2013). As an alternative, the dramaturgical approach to conservation I propose here accepts that it is never possible to completely capture the manifestation and experience of every performance of a work. Rather than emphasizing what information and knowledge is lost, it focuses on what is gained when a script is reinterpreted at each new performance. Moreover, in the performing arts, the task of documenting past performances is the responsibility of many different stakeholders: critics write reviews and conduct interviews with makers documenting their motivations; theatre scholars and musicologists analyze and document the dramaturgy of performances in publications; actors, musicians, and dancers keep embodied memories of past performances; companies create program booklets and photo and video registrations; and visitors keep individual memories of their experiences. In the case of time-based media installations, I would argue, we can similarly distribute the responsibility for documenting and remembering among the various actors that form the "ecosystem" around these works.

The German literary scholar Aleida Assmann has conceptualized how the interaction between remembering and forgetting in such cultural "ecosystems" takes place. In her model of cultural memory — the way a society creates a framework of reference that transcends the individual life span of its members — forgetting is inextricably linked to remembering: "As in the head of the individual, also in the communication of society much must be continuously forgotten to make place for new information, new challenges, and new ideas to face the present and future" (Assmann 2008: 97). As she states, forgetting is the norm, whereas remembering is the exception, and "requires special and costly precautions" in the form of cultural institutions (98). Assmann distinguishes between two types of forgetting and remembering: active and passive. Contrary to active forgetting, which involves acts of violence and destruction, information or objects that are "passively forgotten" (lost, neglected, abandoned) may still be retrieved later, for example through archaeological methods. Once retrieved, the documents or objects may also again be remembered: when stored in the archives of cultural institutions, they become part of what Assmann terms our "reference memory" — the collection of documents or objects that we deem worthy enough to keep in order to prevent their disappearance. In order to be *actively* remembered, finally, the documents can be reactivated in society's "working memory," the realm of cultural memory that Assmann associates with the canon: "It is built on a small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated an communicated in ever-new presentations

and performances" (100). With this model in mind, I would argue, we can trust that the cultural institutions we have built for the documentation of our time-based media installations — besides museums and archives, and including critics, art historians, visitors and the artists themselves — will jointly build the basis for the continued performance of that documentation that will ensure that the legacy of time-based media installation art keeps reoccurring in our active, working memory in constantly new and updated ways.

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