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Ethical problems and a solution in the conservation of a faded colour photograph in the work of Ger van Elk

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Abstract:

Brightly lit exhibition spaces and unsuitable storage facilities alter most modern artworks in which colour photography is incorporated, as seen in the 'paintings' and sculptural installations by Ger van Elk (Amsterdam, 1941). His own 'solution' to this problem by reproducing his 30-year old airbrushed and painted photographs with the latest digital imaging techniques, as conducted recently, raises questions about authenticity, the meaning of materials, the original artist's intention, patina and the like. Reflecting upon this recent conservation history, the artist's past and current working methods, and through an elaborate interview, it becomes clear that the artist's attitude towards conservation opposes the ethical code of conservation. To the artist the image is more important than its materialisation, whereas the conservator seeks to preserve the material state of an artwork as much as possible because this is the only true thing in connection to itself. If however the meaning of the artwork is lost because of irreversible material failure, an appropriate conservation treatment has to be found.

The chromogenic photograph in Roquebrune, a triangular sculpture from 1979 in the collection of the Frans Hals Museum, shows severe discolouration. One could argue to accept the discolouration as 'patina' of a print from the late '70s. But the meaning of the work is derived from the balance between the photo and the painted abstract version of it. The colours in the painting should reflect the ones in the photo mirroring it in a perfectly symmetrical composition. Because of the discoloration of the photograph, the visual interaction is lost. The artist would probably want to replace the image from the late 1970's, so to keep safe the material integrity of the artwork it was important to find a suitable conservation treatment prior to consulting the artist. A solution was found in lighting the object through coloured filters to camouflage the dominant colour left in the photograph and compensate for the faded colours. If the shape of an artwork allows it, 'retouching with light' at the exhibition site can be a successful 'conservation treatment' and replacement of original faded colour photographs is not needed.

see also:

Sanneke Stigter, *Living artist, living artwork? The problem of faded colour photographs in the work of Ger van Elk*, Ashok Roy & Perry Smith (eds.), *Modern Art, New Museums*, Preprints of the 20th International Congress in Bilbao, IIC London 2004, pp. 105-108

Sanneke Stigter, Ger van Elk: *Conserveringsproblematiek van kleurenfotografie in hedendaagse kunst*, final diploma thesis of the training programme of Conservation and Restoration of Paintings and Painted Objects, with a specialisation in the Conservation of Modern Art, at the Limburg Conservation Institute, Maastricht, July 2003 (112 pages in Dutch with English Summary)