

Reprinting Color Photographs: An Overview of the Issues
Introduction to SFMOMA’s Artist Initiative Photography Research

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Speaker

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00:07: ERIN O’TOOLE: I’ve very pleased to see so many familiar faces in the audience today, especially the numerous museum colleagues who have come from all over the US and from Europe to take part in this conversation with us. Thank you all for coming. Please know that we really value your input today—comments, questions, criticisms, whatever they might be. And we’ve allotted plenty of time over the course of the day for Q&A. And we strongly encourage you to weigh in as we go along. So sometimes we’ll have the Q&A at the end of a section of the day, so please write down your questions. And we really want to hear from you. I think we’ll all benefit from having the input of all of the great minds in this room over the course of the day.

00:57: So my job this morning is to set the stage for the presentations and panels to follow, by raising some of the issues that museums face when considering whether or not to engage artists to reprints works in the collection that have shifted color over time. I’m going to talk about what we at SFMOMA have done around this subject to date, and I’m also going to provide my own take on the issues, to get the conversation started.

01:23: In 2013, when we first proposed the photography component of the Artist Initiative, we planned to look at conservation problems related to photographs made in the 1970s. That decade was of particular interest to us because it was a time of great experimentation with process and printing that often resulted in work that has proven to be not terribly archival. Not incidentally, it was also the decade when museums

began to widely embrace color photographs as works of art, and when they started acquiring them in greater numbers. Soon after the project began, we determined that we should focus exclusively on color photography because the question of whether or not to reprint was starting to feel ever more pressing.

02:08: So we decided to go in this direction when then-senior curator of photography, Sandra Phillips, learned that Stephen Shore had recently reprinted some of his 1970s photographs in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Concerned that some of Shore's prints in SFMOMA's collection had changed rather dramatically over the years, Phillips asked Shore if he would be willing to reprint works in our collection as well. He accepted her proposal; and as a way of launching our Artist Initiative project, we asked him to come to the museum to look at prints with our curators, conservators, and collections staff, and talk about what led him to reprint. Up to that point, we had only allowed one other work in the collection to be reprinted by an artist, a gelatin silver print, as it turns out, that was made in the late 1970s and was not properly processed. When we decided to move forward with Shore, we knew from previous experience that reprinting posed complication questions for a museum, and that we'd be faced with an array of ethical and philosophical quandaries as we proceeded; but I don't think we quite anticipated how complicated or how fascinating, really, the questions would be.

03:17: What we've discovered over the course of these past couple of years is that asking the question of whether or not to reprint is a bit like opening Pandora's box, as it raises profound questions around the proper function of a museum, the concept of the original, and the very nature of photography itself. The question of reprinting would be relatively straightforward, if it tended to involve a simple one-to-one exchange of prints made at around the same time, using the same paper and process. Trading one C-print made in 1976 for another made that same year, for instance. The problem is

that except in the rare event that a print is accidentally damaged soon after it's acquired, such as in shipping and mounting, this is rarely the case. What we are more often referring to when we say reprinting is exchanging a print made using an older technology, say a C-print, with a newer one, such as an inkjet print. The older the damaged the print, the more likely it is its replacement would be made using a different paper and process, and the more chance that it will not look exactly the same.

04:28: While many of the people in this audience today are museum professionals or artists who understand how museums function, I think it's instructive to state clearly from the outset that one of the main reasons that there is debate on this subject is because the very idea of replacing something original with a replica conflicts with traditional art museum practice. Historically, the role of an art museum is to preserve objects. As my colleague Corey Keller says, objects and not images. And under the traditional model, the materiality of the original is of central value. So when, as is happening with increasing frequency, as Clement mentioned, a photographer approaches a museum proposing to replace vintage prints with new ones made in a different medium, a tension can arise between the artist's goals for the future of their work and accepted museum norms and values. Most photographers I've spoken to on this subject would prefer to reprint shifted works held in a museum's collection than to see such prints exhibited. Over the course of this project, I only encountered one artist who patently refused to reprint. Several years after our initial conversation, however, when I called to ask if she would be willing to be interviewed as part of the project, I was surprised to learn that in the intervening years, she had changed course—mostly under pressure from collectors and galleries. She was the only artist I had encountered who took a strict reprinting stance, and even she had relented.

06:02: By contrast, curators and conservators tend to be much more cautious about the prospect of reprinting, and are more apt to be concerned about what might be lost

when, for example, a vintage C-print is replaced by a contemporary inkjet print. This should not come as any surprise to any of you. Museum professionals are trained to be conservative and cautious when it comes to how we treat the objects in our care. And that's a really good thing. We believe in the important historical connection between the materiality of an artwork and the time at which it was made; that the paper and the process used to make a print are integral to the meaning and the value of the work.

06:43: So what does a museum do when faced with color photographs that have shifted? At one extreme of the spectrum, there is what I call the tough love position, where much like a dealer in Vegas might do, the museum essentially says to the artist, 'What's laid is played. No takebacks, no re-dos. The cards are on the table.' So you live with what was created at the time, and the museum's job is to do its best to preserve the work and make it last as long as possible. This means putting color works in cold storage, if you have it. It means reducing their exposure to light. You don't put them on view for very long or very frequently. And when you do show them, you do so under low light conditions. And when worse comes to worst, a curator or a conservator determines that a print is too fragile or too damaged to put on view anymore, you might opt to officially, quote/unquote, "retire it from exhibition," to protect it.

07:41: Such a position is in keeping with how museums have treated art made in other eras and in other mediums. Other kinds of art fade and change, too, of course, and we're perfectly okay with it. Some of us appreciate the look of silver mirroring on a gelatin silver print, for example, or the crackled varnish on an antique chair. We value these changes. We appreciate the patina on an object's surface that has accumulated over time. Roman statues weren't white when they were originally made, as we're starting to learn more about recently. They were painted what we might today consider to be garish colors. And at one point, they all had their noses and arms and other parts attached, too. But we show them, and we value them today in a condition that is so

heavily degraded that they would be unrecognizable to the people who made them, and we don't even bat an eye. To use a more contemporary example, we show other kinds of works on paper that have faded over time, like pastels or etchings or salt prints. So why not color photographs? Why should they be any different? Why don't we just live with them as they are and learn to appreciate their yellowed tones and shifted colors, like we do those of an old watercolor?

08:57: To my mind, the big difference is that the majority of the Roman statuettes, Impressionist pastels, and nineteenth century salt prints in museum collections remained in good condition for generations after their makers had died. And of course, a museum's job is to preserve them in the best possible condition for future generations. But I would argue that color photographs are different. Many color prints are dying long before the artists who made them. And many of these living artists are willing and able to produce new prints from the same negatives. This is major. This is different. This is unlike what museums dealt with in the past. Faced with the question of whether to accept a replacement print for a color-shifted work, we need to ask ourselves whether the materiality of the original print is so central to the work that we are willing to pass up an opportunity to possibly extend its life by accepting a new print made by the artist. As Paul Whitmore, the director of the Materials Aging Lab at the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale, put it to me in an interview, using a constitutional metaphor, "the question is whether you take a strict constructionist position versus one that embraces the photograph as a living document."

10:10: It's important to note that for curators and conservators of contemporary art, the idea of replication is not at all foreign. It's actually quite routine. In fact, our colleagues at the Whitney have a replication committee that meets regularly to discuss issues surrounding the recreation of artworks, either for exhibition or conservation

reasons. Refabrication can become necessary for various reasons besides damage and color shifts, as when an artwork is itself a set of instructions the artist has devised for someone else to follow in order to make the work, as is the case for people like Sol LeWitt or Yoko Ono. At the Whitney, they so frequently reprint color photographs that they do so without bringing it to the committee. It's that typical and uncontroversial to them. Like many other kinds of contemporary art made in the sixties and seventies, color photographs were made with industrial materials that were not designed to last over the long haul. This makes them different from works made with traditional art mediums like oil paint, marble, wood, bronze, or even graphite. In this way, I find color photographs to be akin to the work of some of my favorite California artists from the sixties: the members of the so-called Finish Fetish cohort or the Light and Space movement, who experimented with newly-invented industrial compounds like resins and plastics. I'm thinking of sculptors like DeWain Valentine, Larry Bell, or Robert Irwin.

11:38: At an exhibition called *Shape Shifters* that I was lucky enough to see at the Hayward Gallery in London last year, I noticed that many of the works that were included in the show by these artists had been recently refabricated. When the works were first made, they were intended to create effects with light, to be luminous and ethereal objects. And yet, like many an Ektachrome print that has yellowed and shifted color with time, some of the resins and plastics, and even glass, used to make these sculptures have also yellowed or become clouded and changed. When resin gets cloudy or scratched, or the plastics change color, the artworks no longer have the impact they once had or that the artists intended. Instead, they can end up looking like some weird dull relics from a cheap sci-fi movie set, rather than the glowing and magical jewels that they once were in their prime. It didn't bother me in the least to discover that some of these pieces that I had so appreciated growing up in L.A. in the 1970s had been refabricated. I didn't miss that they were made out of faulty 1960s material. They didn't seem any less authentic to me, in other words. I've seen examples that have not been

remade, and they can look truly sad. And I don't know what purpose it serves to put a degraded object like that on view, other than to warn young artists to work with material that is more stable. So seeing these beautifully refabricated sculptures made me wonder whether we shouldn't be thinking about color photographs in similar terms. That when the industrial chemicals with which they were made break down, the artworks end up becoming technological relics, no longer achieving their intended visual effect.

13:23: The fire at Notre-Dame Cathedral got me thinking, too. I was fascinated to learn how little of the cathedral was actually original to the fourteenth century, and how much had been added or taken away over the years. But most lay people still think of it as an example of Gothic architecture, and not a nineteenth century reconstruction. And when Notre-Dame caught fire, no one suggested that the Parisians should just leave it in ruins and let it die. Everybody wanted it to be rebuilt. I think we need to take into account the spirit in which the work was made and whether the artist rests more in the object itself or in the concept behind it. This can be a very difficult thing to ascertain in photography. In the case of someone like Ansel Adams or Edward Weston, it seems relatively clear. Both of these photographers worked very hard in the darkroom to create beautiful prints from their negatives. And we all know that Adams thought of the negative as the score, and the print as the performance. And many of his negatives required a great deal of work to turn them into the incredible works of art that we all know. Conversely, it seems pretty clear that for many conceptual artists who use photography, people like Jan Dibbets, for example, that a photograph function as documentation of an idea, and that the artist didn't see the print itself as the artwork. But what about the majority of color photographs, which could arguably be considered somewhere in between these two poles? Does it make sense for us to treat them more like prints by Ansel Adams, for instance, or more like prints by Jan Dibbets? Or perhaps

we should be looking for guidance outside of photography; to conceptual art, for example, or to time-based media, where transferring and migrating are commonplace.

15:11: When Stephen Shore came to San Francisco to meet with SFMOMA staff in 2014, the conversation was wide-ranging and included discussion of his original intention for his work, his process, and his deep regret over the current condition of many of his prints. One of the more memorable takeaways from the day was hearing from Shore that he cringes when he sees prints of his work on view in museums, that have shifted color, as he doesn't believe that they properly represent his original intent anymore. When somebody in the group told him that the chromogenic prints were nostalgic, he said, quote, "The prints aren't nostalgic, you are nostalgic for an idea you have of the 1970s. And these prints didn't look like this in the 1970s."

15:57: As I see it, the core conundrum is that when a print has shifted color, an institution is faced with the decision to either retain the changed original, which may no longer represent the artist's vision for the work and may eventually be too fragile to put on view, or to accept a reprint that is materially different from the original. No matter how faithful to the original, a reprint made thirty or forty years later is not equivalent. The paper will be different, and likely so too will be the process. Thus the institution, in conversation with the artist, has to decide, when embarking on a reprinting project, how much difference between the original and the replacement print they're willing to accept. We decided to accept reprints from Shore into our collection. The replacements were chromogenic like the original; but they were made with a LightJet machine, on Fuji Crystal Archive paper, rather than on the Kodak resin-coated paper that he originally used and which has been so subject to color change. The only point of contention between SFMOMA staff and the artist was that he insisted on making much larger than the eight by tens he was replacing, which to many, including me, radically changed the impact the prints had on the viewer. These new prints, which

were close to eighteen by twenty-two inches, were more than double the size of the originals. Shore didn't think that the larger size was an issue, arguing that the size of prints purchased in the seventies and eighties was not an artistic decision, but an arbitrary one that the purchaser could make based on their budget. Prints were available from his gallery at different sizes, and most buyers happened to select the smaller ones because they were cheaper. As the subject of size was not something Shore was open to negotiating, we accepted the larger prints, despite our reservations that they were not in keeping with the spirit of the originals they were meant to replace.

17:52: Another key issue that arose in our conversation with Shore was the fate of the originals. Shore would've preferred we destroy them, but agreed to allow us to retain them for study purposes. At the start of my talk, I mentioned that prior to Shore, we had only worked with one other artist to reprint a work in our collection. At the time, the artist had insisted that we destroy the original, and we complied. Over time, we've come to deeply regret that fact, and have come to believe that no matter what we do, it's imperative to retain the original, even if we never plan to put it on view again. If you keep the original, at the very least you have not made an irreversible decision. It's the cautious and humble course of action, and ensures that if in subsequent generations, our successors decide that reprinting was a mistake, they can always go back to the original. It's also in keeping with the conservation ethic of not performing treatments that cannot be undone.

18:49: About six weeks after our meeting with Shore, and while we were still processing what we had learned from our conversation with him, we convened a roundtable of photography conservators during the 2014 American Institute of Conservation Conference, which was held in San Francisco that year. At this gathering, we discussed a number of questions related to reprinting color photographs that came up in our

meeting with Shore, including: What constitutes an unexhibitable print? Who makes the decision that a print is unexhibitable and should be taken out of circulation? And relatedly, what level of color change in a print is acceptable, and is it possible to measure it? We also talked about retaining or destroying originals and what happens to the original if it is kept. What becomes its status in the collection?

19:37 In the months that followed, SFMOMA's conservation department sent out a survey to a wider group of conservation colleagues, to learn about the practices and policies surrounding color photography in other institutions. We also met with two other photographers who made color work in the 1970s and eighties. Some of the issues we discussed with them mirrored those raised by Shore; others were new. Both of them will be joining me on a panel after lunch. First we met with Richard Misrach. Like Shore, Misrach often prefers to reprint at a larger size and to destroy the originals, but ultimately let us keep them in the collection for posterity. Unlike Shore, whose reprints were chromogenic, Misrach's are inkjet prints, the process he now prefers. We also met with Janet Delaney to discuss work from her *South of Market* series, which she made in the late 1970s and early eighties. At the time she originally made the work, Delaney only made a small number of chromogenic prints. When she began showing it again in the mid-2000s and SFMOMA was interested in acquiring works, we were faced with the decision to either buy vintage C-prints or new inkjet prints made by a local lab. We ended up buying a combination of both, the C-prints that were in the best condition, and inkjet prints for the rest. Several years later, when we met with Delaney to look at her work for the Artist Initiative, she had grown to feel that the inkjet prints made by the lab were substandard and wanted to replace them with inkjet prints that she now is making herself, which she felt were truer to the original look of the pictures. Delaney, who had worked as a commercial printer for a lab in the 1980s, reminded us how fickle and inconsistent color printing is and was, and how variable it can be in the wrong hands.

21:23: After these meetings, the project went on an unplanned hiatus. Sandra Philipps, who had led the photography department for over twenty-five years, announced her retirement; and the museum, which had closed in 2013 for a massive expansion project, began to prepare to move into the new building, which would open in 2016. We all threw ourselves into the move and the rehanging and left the reprinting project aside for a few years. In retrospect, I think it was better that the project was put on hold, as we found that there was more interest in the field when we took up the question again a few years later. Also, when we moved back into the new building we would finally have a cold storage facility, which would help us preserve the color photographs in our collection and provide further impetus to work on a policy for dealing with color works more generally. Once Clement Cheroux assumed the post of senior curator, we restarted the project, this time going on a listening tour to hear about how colleagues at other museums dealt with the issue. Before we started our tour, we wrote a draft policy, which we shared in advance with our colleagues, and which we used to spark conversation. In each of these meetings, which we convened at various museums in the US and Europe, we invited curators and conservators and were often joined by staff from other related museum departments, including registration and collections management.

22:43: So here are a few of my key takeaways from these meetings. Everyone acknowledges that there is a problem with color photography, particularly C-prints made in the 1970s and eighties, and nobody has a set policy on how to deal with reprinting them. Aside from MoMA, very few institutions have undertaken more than one reprinting project, and most of those projects involved a single print or a small series. Many institutions would like to have works in their collections reprinted, but they do not have the resources to do so. Many of the reprinting projects that have occurred to date at museums have been undertaken at the artist's request and at their expense.

Some of the institutions who have accepted reprints have regrets over the quality of the replacement prints, and felt that they had ended up making too many tradeoffs, such as accepting prints of a different size or being forced to destroy the originals. Many curators and conservators are deeply conflicted about reprinting. They acknowledge that there are artworks in their collection that have changed to the point where they should probably not be shown anymore, but they don't feel that a new inkjet print is an adequate replacement for a 1970s C-print.

23:52: Terminology is also a problem. And there are no established norms in the field. Is a replacement for a damaged print technically a, quote/unquote reprint if it is made using a different process, or is it something else? And if we agree that it's something else, what do we call it? A replacement print, a facsimile, an entirely new work generated from the same negative? The terminological question is something we need to address going forward. Relatedly, dating conventions are not consistent across institutions, making it hard for the public to understand what is an original and what is not. There's general agreement that we need to be transparent in how we label and refer to reprints on wall texts.

24:34: Before I end, I want to just briefly address the market. Obviously, reprinting is of great interest to dealers and to auction houses, too. And I know that we have representatives of both here in the audience today. The market is, of course, critical to this discussion; but it also has the potential to swamp these proceedings and take us off course. Today we would like to focus on the issues that surround reprinting for museums. There's a real difference between a museum and a private collection, and between the concerns of institutions and that of the market. And although we all function in the same ecosystem and what museums choose to do will necessarily impact the market, we don't have enough time today to deal in-depth with market issues. The other I thing want to make clear is that our goal for today is to talk about

reprinting by living artists, and not by estates. Estate printing is an important related topic, but it brings up a whole host of other issues that we simply don't have the time to unpack today either.

25:32: In closing, this is a very thorny topic, as you can tell. And over the course of the Artist Initiative, I have found myself taking many positions on reprinting, sometimes all at once. There is no right answer or no one answer that suits every case. And I think that in order to be productive, we need to embrace a little ambiguity and live with some messiness, as hard as that might be. I believe that material carries meaning and that it connects a print to the time in which it was created, and that that connection is very important. I love beautiful vintage prints, and I also love ones that aren't so beautiful, that haven't aged well, too. But as a curator who has worked extensively in recent years with photographers in their sixties and seventies who are watching their work shift and yellow and change, I'm very sympathetic to their desire to make new prints while they are still able. I find it very difficult to say to a living artist, 'Sorry, even though you can make a new print, we don't want it.' Because it can sound like I'm saying, 'Sorry that you didn't have the money in 1972 to make dye transfers, that you made C-prints at a time when Kodak and the other photographic companies were ripping everybody off and selling crappy material. And oh, p.s., your work is essentially dead.'

26:52: This doesn't mean that I don't believe in establishing guidelines or setting a clear policy, or that there might be instances where we opt not to accept reprints. I don't believe that museums should be inviting artists willy-nilly to reconceptualize earlier work, and I believe that sometimes reprinting will not make sense. I also firmly believe that we must retain the originals no matter what, and that we need to guarantee artists that we will keep them in the collection in perpetuity, that they will never be deaccessioned. While the artist is alive, I think we owe it to them to at the very least, hear them out, even if the museum ultimately chooses to go in a different direction

than the artist might prefer. I think we need to take the concerns of artists seriously and to do our best to do right by their work, even if it means making concessions and ultimately changing the way museums work. This kind of conversation amongst artists, curators and conservators is what the Artist Initiative was designed to promote, and I think it's a valuable model going forward. Thank you. [applause]