

A Philosophical and Ethical Framework on the Topic of Reprinting Photographs

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Speaker

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00:04: MONICA MARCHESI: Good morning. Thank you. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the organization for the invitation to present here at this inspiring event. My name is Monica Marchesi. And my presentation is called *Reproduction as an Agent of Change*. My paper reflects upon the expectation we have about reproduction, the possible outcomes of such process, and the unresolved and often troubling discrepancies between these expectations. But before starting, I would like to give you some background on how I use the term reproduction in this presentation, and how I became engaged in the issue of reproducing photographic artworks. After this short introduction, I will present four case studies that I find particularly thought-provoking and hopefully, appropriate to keep the discussion of today going.

01:09: I'm aware that the term reproduction may seem a theoretical minefield because it has been used in various ways and contexts. But to me, reprinting entails just the reprinting of the photographic image, while reproduction embraces the reprinting, as well as the replication of other elements present in a photographic work, such as a particular type of frame, mounting or shape, or an application at the back or at the front of the photographic object. The word is intended here as a substitution and a replacement of a photographic work by using similar technology and materials to counteract unwanted changes to the initial print after a lapse of time. These changes can be, for example, caused by color fading or mechanical damage. My involvement in this topic started when I became one of the paper conservators of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. And as such, I started to take care of the paper-based collection of the museum, which includes also photographs. In this role, I was involved

in the decision-making process about the reproduction of several photographic artworks. What I found interesting, and at times disturbing, was that at the Stedelijk Museum, very little discussion took place on what occurs at a theoretical level when artists come to the museum with a request to reproduce their works. In most cases, the curator's approach was to follow the artist's wish. As the preservation and the conservation of the authentic material formed one of the pillars of my training and my professional life as a conservator, I felt a certain professional discomfort in accepting the reproduction of these works. It is safe to say that the retaining of the authentic material is still now one of the main principles on which the discipline of conservation is based on. By allowing the practice of reproduction, a great deal of the conservation theoretical framework is challenged.

03:45: As a result of this professional discomfort, I decided to investigate in more depth the issue. The research concluded in the dissertation, *Forever Young*. The resulting book is a practice-driven research about activities that have taken place mostly at the Stedelijk Museum. I have spent some time to introduce my research and background, because I think you will better understand my close relationship to the materiality of the objects and the responsibility to cherish these objects within the museum. Reproduction doesn't only substitute and physically replace one version with another. It is also a subtractive and additive process, in which characteristics are altered, some aspects are repeated, others are omitted, and new features are introduced.

04:57: So it is safe to say that reproduction should be viewed as an agent of change. However, the notion of photography as a reproducible medium is persistent. The idea that photographs can be replicated is a very powerful assumption. It is a very appealing thought that we could prolong the life of a photograph, despite the signs of age, and assuming that we will have an identical work in a pristine condition. In this light, we view multiple autographic objects, in this case photographic prints, as identical because of a

convention regarding which material details are considered significant or insignificant. But in reality, we'll have a different object with variances that in the best case, will be subtle and relatively invisible. With this understanding, we then can accept that representation will imply a certain amount of change. Therefore, representation never replicates all the aspects of a photographic object. Photography is actually a multipliable medium, able to multiply the image, but unable to replicate the material characteristic of the photograph as an object. If we are at ease with this implication, then is it possible to discuss reproduction as a possible preservation strategy? It means that the amount of change that is allowed has to be agreed upon [by] the different stakeholders involved in the process. To establish the amount of change allowed is a complex matter with no clear-cut answers. It is a process of calibration for a different set of values at different times.

06:53: I will now shortly present two of the cases that I have studied during my doctoral research, and two other cases that I'm involved [with] at this moment. Due to time constraints, I cannot go into much detail; however, each case, in its singularity, demonstrates the complexity of the reproduction process, as well [as] the different aspects of this practice. *Comet Sea 3 by 60 degrees*, by the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets, is an abstract seascape containing twenty parts. Each part includes two cropped chromogenic photographs mounted in a frame, with dry transfer letters applied at the front. Because of the dramatic fading of the prints, the artist made the clear to the Stedelijk Museum his wish to reproduce his work, and convinced the staff about its necessity. This occurred twice, in 1996 and in 2012. From a material point of view all the three versions differed. Each time, the photographic paper had [a] slightly different characteristic texture and gloss. And what you see on the left side, the three versions on top of each other, so that you can see the dramatic fading and yellowing of the prints.

08:24: The fonts and the size of the dry transfer letters changed every time. So each part—this is part number three— no, sorry, number forty-two—has annotation of numbers, and these are applied with dry transfer letters. And each time, the font, it's slightly different.

08:47: The photographic images also slightly changed to overcome mold staining in the original negative. So what you see is in the 1973, you probably can see that there are waves in the sea. And in 1996, it's gone. And in 2012, actually it comes back, but in a smaller size. And in the left image, in the brown circle, you see maybe— I don't know if you can see it, but there are some clouds. And in the '96 version, because of the mold, the negative was masked. So then you actually don't have a sky anymore; a more geometric part. The artist and the empowered decision makers at the Stedelijk Museum considered the change in the materials and the alteration of the images acceptable. I suspect because the changes were limited in size, and only visible at a very attentive examination. This is a presentation of two photos of how it was displayed, the same work in 1973 and in 2012.

10:16: In the case of *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)*, by the American artist John Baldessari, things went differently. I'm aware that materially, Baldessari's case doesn't really fit in the conference theme; the prints forming the work are black and white photographs. However, from a theoretical point of view, it shows interesting general aspects regarding reproduction. For this reason, I've decided to present it here. So fourteen black and white photographs printed on a variety of paper form the work. Each photograph was originally unframed, glued onto a sheet of foamboard, and dry transfer letters were applied on the surface. The work is part of the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, also in the Netherlands. In this case, it was the curator of the Van Abbemuseum that actively asked the artist about the possibility to reproduce the work, as it has suffered mechanical damage during display. Because of

financial constraints, it was agreed that Baldessari would print a new set of photographs in Los Angeles, his home base, directly from the negatives and without comparison to the first set of photographs. This aspect turned out to be key to the disappointing outcome of the reproduction process. Because of differences in the image magnification, in the texture of the photographic paper and the image tonality, the curator of the museum refused to accept the reprinted version as an acceptable substitution of the work. He and other curators after him preferred to keep in the collection the damaged version, rather than the new pristine one. The differences were subtle, but visible enough to decide against the new version. So in the 1992 version, you can still see the cropping line. And if you would follow the cropping line, so the image would actually be different. As you can see, the distance between the head and the edge of the man would be different, in comparison to the 1981 versions. I don't know if it's possible to see it in the PowerPoint presentation, but the tonality of the image and the texture of the paper is completely different— of complete— It's different.

12:59: For these reasons, the new reprinted photographs never reached the status of a genuine substitution of the first version. The refused prints have been kept ever since in the Van Abbemuseum as archival documents. Baldessari was keen to reprint the work a third time, but because of technological changes in the meantime, he suggested digitizing the negatives, adding the text to the digital files, and making inkjet prints from those. And here we see that uncertainties in museum practice begin to appear. The museum staff dismissed the artist's proposal on account of the technical and material differences there would be between the two sets of prints. Baldessari's case shows the discrepancy between Baldessari's artistic practice and the expectation of the museum about the results of the reproduction. The curatorial staff did not have a well-defined stand on this issue, initially supporting reprinting and duplication, but in the end preferring the original form, when technical changes and visible material differences proved too extreme.

14:26: In both cases, the reproduction was not straightforward, as material and technical differences among the various versions were present. However, in Dibbets' case, the decision making between the creating artist and the empowered museum members was aligned; while in Baldessari's case, what is important to preserve changed over time. What the two cases clearly show is that the establishment and agreement on what may and may not change is, at the end, a subjective matter. And because of the subjectivity involved, reproduction is not an easy fix, and needs a case-by-case engagement of the various stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. I think it is important to mention that in these two cases, both works were created as a unique work of art.

15:30: But things become even more complex with editioned photographs. I would like now to introduce the issue regarding the reproduction of photographs by the Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra. I can assure you that size does matter in an issue regarding reproduction. Five years ago, the head of collections of the Stedelijk Museum refused to reproduce a series of chromogenic photographs by Dijkstra, as the artist intended to reprint her works larger than they originally were. The fact that the original analog photographs would be printed at inkjet prints was of less concern to the head of collections. In this case, changing size was, for the managing staff, just too evident. Let me note there is another complicating factor in Dijkstra's artistic practice. The majority of Dijkstra's photographs are created as a limited edition, in which a number of generally identical prints are produced. Moreover, the artist usually works in series, making photographs with a similar theme or subject. So this is another photograph of Dijkstra, of the so-called *Beach Portraits* that are present in the Stedelijk Museum, and this is another one. Her artistic practice increases the interrelation of the various prints with each other. Moreover, Dijkstra strives to a consistency of technique, format, and presentation within a series. But this practice also increases the complexity in the

matter regarding the reproduction of discolored photographs. If the Stedelijk Museum, following the artist's wish, would agree in reprinting the photographs in a larger size, the question remains open how the new prints would fit in the edition, as well as in the series. Hopefully, in the near future, I will be able to examine this aspect by involving the artist and collaborating with the research department of the Tate in London. The study of the Stedelijk Museum photographs, as well as Tate's ones, is an outstanding opportunity to investigate how to proceed in the case of reprinting photographs produced as a limited edition or being part of a series, and to think about the possible implications, as more prints may exist in various museums, as well [as] in private collections.

18:25: Another aspect that I think needs to be addressed is how to cope with the reproduction when this is incorporated in the artistic practice of an artist. Lately, I have been involved with the practice of the German artist Wolfgang Tillmans. Tillmans considers the possibility to reprint his large format inkjets right from the beginning. On the one hand, the unframed display of these large format prints is of great importance to the artist. For Tillmans, the presentation on the wall, without glazing or other protective means, communicates his interest in the materiality of the print. On the other hand, Tillmans acknowledges from the beginning, the possible fading of his large format inkjets. In order to counteract this unwanted phenomenon, when a collector or a museum acquires one of the large format inkjets, this comes together with the so-called reference print, a chromogenic photographic print of a smaller size, with digital files of the image kept on a storage device, and with a certificate instructing the owner how to reprint the picture when the inkjet print has faded. The certificate gives the right to the owner to reprint the picture, but also it requires him or her to destroy the faded print. Tillmans' practice raises important questions about reprinting photographic artwork. Should a museum destroy an inkjet print when the creating artist asks to do so? Does the artist have the right to decide about his or her work, even

if the work is not in his or her possession anymore? And finally, does the owner also have the right to refuse and decide to keep the faded print as a part of the work?

20:41: These case studies illustrate the many variables that reproduction involves. As I have earlier mentioned, the reproduction of photographic artwork is materially and technically challenging, as many contingent variables may influence the course of the process, as shown clearly in Dibbets' and in Baldessari's case. But also from a conceptual perspective, reproduction turns out to be a problematic choice. As we have seen in Baldessari's case, the appreciation of the object's materiality is often time-related and subject to personal taste and values. Dijkstra's case reveals how the artist's shifting attitude toward the different versions regarding technique, size, and questions relating to limited edition, challenges traditional values within a museum. Tillmans' incorporation of reprinting as an artistic practice, with the subsequent destruction of the faded prints, poses questions on the works ownership and who has the right to decide. Thank you for your attention. [applause]