

Reprinting Color Photographs: An Overview of the Issues

Audience Q + A

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Speakers

Erin O'Toole, Baker Street Foundation Associate Curator of Photography, SFMOMA

Sarah Meister, Curator of Photography, MoMA

Monica Marchesi, Paper Conservator, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

00:08: ERIN O'TOOLE: I want to thank Sarah and Monica again for their participation and their great presentations. What's interesting is that we didn't coordinate and we all talked about Jan Dibbets as an example, which is sort of interesting, I thought. The other thing I wanted to say is two things that's come up. Is that when images are projected like this, it's sort of a funny thing, related to this whole question of the visual qualities of the work that we're talking about, is that a lot of the subtleties of the difference between pictures gets lost. And you'll see that throughout the day. And so you just have to trust us that there's more extreme differences between the before and after than you might be able to see on the screen. It's just an unfortunate thing about projecting.

00:56: O'TOOLE (Cont.): The other thing I want to say is that I understand that I sounded maybe a little strident about not talking about the market and about estates. And what I was wanting to say is not that we shouldn't talk about the market or about estate printing, but that I'm just concerned that if we get too far afield in those areas, that we'll kind of go too far away from the mission, which is really to talk about museum practice. So it's not to discourage talking about the market; it's just not to go down that rabbit hole and get lost there. So do we have anybody who wants to—? Virginia?

01:37: AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. Thanks for the really wonderful presentations, including yours, with not quite being strident, but opinionated. So the two words actually are words that are coming up: reproduction and replication. And I understand those as strategies to preserve a photograph or the original sort of intentionality of the photograph. I'm a little bit more concerned with the idea of using that opportunity to reconceptualize what the photograph would be. And I wonder—I think Erin, you touched on that—if the three of you might talk a little bit more about that nuance of introducing a new approach to the image years later in its reconceptualization.

02:31: SARAH MEISTER: Sure. Actually, don't go too far away from the microphone, because I might have a follow-up question for you in that. But I guess one of the things that struck me when Monica was speaking is that one of the things to keep in mind is, of course, the photographer's own relationship, the artist's own relationship, to photographs. And so for someone like Jan Dibbets, when he's using photography to express an idea that is best expressed through photographs, but the actual characteristics of those photographs are not central, they are just the current expression, that is why we at MoMA accept that— You know, we have a reprinting thing that's like, it's dramatically different. But the question is, does one expression of that or another— or how do those expressions interfere with or support the audience's response to the work? And so I think it's a very different thing for someone like Jan Dibbets as for someone like Rineke Dijkstra, for whom the scale and materiality of the print as originally conceived was about that. And yet even that, I don't worry— It's funny. Maybe because I have Lee Ann by my side, or maybe because we just think about this as sort of part of the regular order of things, I don't— Even with Rineke Dijkstra, for us, the important part is to try to understand what's changing, how is it documented, how—? And that's why we don't really worry. You know, if it's really important to the artist that we destroy the original, we'll probably keep a scrap of it. We're always coming up with circumstances where posterity is probably going to judge us harshly. And so the best

MEISTER (Cont.): thing we can do is try to be thoughtful and systematic and responsive to the art. And we don't give, I would say, undue or free reign to an artist; but we recognize that in a responsible dialog, with certain artists, things may have to change. So I guess to your question of whether a preservation strategy could lead to a different material form of a work— Is that what your question was? Sorry. But I would say yes, it can. But I'm not positive that was your question.

05:08: AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's part of it. I mean, in different technology it's clear, because that may be only what's involved. But then thinking, oh, well, I wasn't able to make it at this size then, but I can make it much larger now— And I think Richard Misrach will bring this up, talking about the largest size that was possible at one time when he made the work, versus the largest size that's possible now. I wouldn't say that's a reconceptualization, but going from, say, a contact of an eight by ten inch negative to an enlargement.

05:39: MEISTER: But Shore was doing that even in the 1970s. You know, there were contact prints, there were— We have them in collection, the different— And so—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: He was making those as multiple options, versus...

MEISTER: Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ...only as one option, which then changes twenty or thirty years later.

MEISTER: Yeah. Oh, I agree.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Okay, thanks.

05:55: O'TOOLE: Yeah, I think it's also about context for me. With the Shore, I was actually more disturbed about the size difference for Shore when the work was first shown in the restaging of the *New Topographics* exhibition that traveled, which also came here, which was a restaging of an exhibition that had happened in the seventies. And he would not allow the original eight by tens to be shown in the exhibition, and insisted that they be at that larger scale. And at the time, I was very frustrated by that because I felt like the rest of the show was all vintage black and white prints, many of which were actually in that exhibition, and Shore's were then these bigger prints that were not what were in the exhibition. Whereas when we acquired them as part of the collection, I took his point and I felt more comfortable with it; but when it was a restaging of the show, I thought, well, at least they could be the size.

07:00: MEISTER: And the counterargument to that, in my mind, is maybe there's an authenticity when you're doing something new, to simply acknowledge that it's new. So instead of making something new that might be mistaken for something that's old— Like when you want to make something— And this is a little bit of a difference between the two Winogrand retrospect[ives]. When John Szarkowski did the MoMA Winogrand retrospective, the later work that Winogrand hadn't looked was printed bigger to signal that it was different. And so sometimes scale can actually be a responsible signal of something. You know, for most people who— I mean, we all read wall labels, but many people don't. And maybe part of our responsibility is when we're doing something different, to really make it obvious.

O'TOOLE: Any other questions?

07:57: AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a couple, actually. What is the most stable process, in regards to— As us artists age, our eyes age, what we see later might be different from what we did twenty years ago. So what is the most stable paper, final product?

O'TOOLE: Being the conservator— The curators are like, 'Ask her.'

MONICA MARCHESI: I'm not a photograph conservator, I'm a paper conservator. But I always learned that silver dye-bleach for color photographs is one of the most stable techniques. But it doesn't exist anymore, so that's— It's discontinued from the market, so you cannot use it. And nowadays, inkjets, they are presented to the market as very stable.

09:06: MEISTER: Pigmented inkjet, not dye.

MARCHESI: Yeah, pigmented inkjet. But it depends. Maybe it's stable from a color point of view, but they are very sensitive to scratches and other problems. So I think it's very difficult to say. For example, for the inkjets by Wolfgang Tillmans, he says specifically that his first prints are very sensitive to color shifting. So he considers the latest prints much more stable. But I'm not sure that that's real, but that's how it's presented to the museum.

09:50: O'TOOLE: I mean, this is one of the problems and sort of the elephant in the room, is that end up having to trust the industry, basically, about the permanence of these various technologies. And as we've seen, we learn things later about promises that were made. And so there are people that we've talked to over the course of this project who believe that inkjet is not that stable. So we are taking a risk there, too. And so I think we have to be flexible and sort of see how it goes over time, and do our best with what we know at the moment.

10:39: AUDIENCE MEMBER: And another little quick one. Can a digital file be considered part of a limited edition?

O'TOOLE: It's starting to become something that artists are working with. And that opens up this whole other Pandora's box that we're all being faced with. Fortunately, our colleagues in media arts deal with this problem. And so I think as this becomes more common, we're going to have to be looking to them to understand how you preserve digital files, because they also deteriorate and have to be migrated. So that's something personally, I don't know all that much about. But I do know that it's something that we're going to be faced with going forward. Richard?

11:28: RICHARD MISRACH: Yeah, just real quick. Can you hear me? Yeah, so something that happened which is really relevant here, when Van Deren Coke was the curator at SFMOMA, he wanted to acquire a couple of my prints, and he requested that I print the Cibachromes specifically because of the long-term— You know, that they were more archival. Those fared terribly. They were a disaster. And I've never done it since. So at the time, everybody thought that Cibachrome was the most archival material, and proved just completely—

12:01: MEISTER: And they also have a different character. I mean, I think partly, it's what we can trust; and then also, it's trying to educate ourselves and encourage the dialog around what is it about the— You know, what's the most important thing that you draw from your negative when you're making a print? And I would argue— I can't even imagine your work in Cibachrome. That sounds weird to me.

MISRACH: Well, it'd be like if I did a portrait of somebody and you did it as a watercolor, and then someone said, 'Do the exact same thing as an acrylic.' It doesn't translate the same. It's got its own properties. But anyway, I just wanted to—

12:35: O'TOOLE: Well, and the good thing is that we didn't destroy the original, right? So that Cibachrome exists in the collection, and we all looked at it and were able to see how different it was, both from the C-prints that you made and the inkjet prints that you make now. And so it's instructive, and it's also a reminder—and I think it was a reminder to all of us—about the fact that these ideas around reproduction change over time, too. And so that seemed like a good strategy at the time, but now— You never felt like it really reproduced your work in a way that was satisfactory to you. So it's a good thing that we didn't stick with that.

MISRACH: Well, one of the things that we did— And it hasn't been brought up, but this may be an interesting model. So SFMOMA does have a handful of my images in multiple mediums over the years.

O'TOOLE: Yeah.

13:35: MISRACH: So in some places, you have four, five, or six study prints, I believe, on Fujicolor, on Cibachrome, on Ektacolor, pigment print. And I think that actually may be worth doing maybe limited—you know, just a certain amount—just so you could see these differences, because they're pretty radical.

MEISTER: Right. But I'll also just point out, in defense of destroying, if we as museums actually try to save every version of everything that's fugitive from here on out— Think of it applied to sculptural material, think of it— It's like we can't always save everything. And so I don't think it's a reasonable or a practical— I think in certain circumstances, and

MEISTER (Cont.): the ability to compare and to use our collections as teaching collections and reference repositories, sure. But I don't think— I mean, we wouldn't be able to acquire new work. You know, it's just— I don't think that always saving everything is necessarily the answer.

O'TOOLE: Jeff. And I think we'll take this as the last question. And we can continue these conversations as we go.

14:50: JEFF ROSENHEIM: Just some thoughts, historical thoughts, working backwards from Sarah's interesting idea. So at the Metropolitan Museum, in the post-Victorian era, the penises were removed from the sculptures, and fig leaves were put on. And the penises are in a drawer in the Greek and Roman Department [laughter]. So what do we do?

O'TOOLE: I had written penises in my [inaudible]...

ROSENHEIM: Yes, I know it was beautiful [inaudible].

O'TOOLE: ...and then I decided like, maybe I'll feel better just saying other things.

ROSENHEIM: Okay. Yeah.

15:24: O'TOOLE: And so thank you, Jeff.

ROSENHEIM: Okay, so moving forward in time, John Ruskin was quite worried that Venice was being over-restored. And in 1845, he went to Venice and made a really stunning series of daguerreotypes of the architecture that was being restored and from his perspective, was being ruined. And he and his valet and some other artists,

ROSENHEIM (Cont.): local, made pictures that he wanted to make of the details of these buildings that were falling down, and still are, and being preserved and still are, and made those daguerreotypes and published a book called *The Stones of Venice*, which is very important. It's the first idea of the dangers of preservation. And it's just sort of something I think we might want to think about today. And of course, those daguerreotypes were completely uncared for for over 100 years, and they were discovered in a couple of boxes in the north of England and were purchased. And they were in bad shape and they were restored. Possibly, over-restored. Okay. And the third one is, all the films that were made on nitrate film—that is, motion picture films that were made on nitrate film—were, during their projection and other uses, catching fire. It has a low burn point or a high burn point, and they were, in many cases, duplicated on diacetate film, which was the absolute, absolute worst preservation material, and immediately deformed and no longer could be used. So just some thoughts for the day.

17:03: O'TOOLE: I think that is a really good place to end before lunch. So thank you all, and we'll see you back in a little bit. [applause]