Issues and Challenges with Reprinting Color Photographs  
Audience Q + A  
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Speakers  
Linde Lehtinen, Assistant Curator of Photography, SFMOMA  
Peter Mustardo, Director, The Better Image  
Markus Müller, recom Art, Berlin

00:08: LINDE LEHTINEN: Thank you both so much for those wonderful presentations.  
Again, yes, short time to talk about a lot of in-depth and very technical material, but a  
great summary though. So I guess I wanted to start first by— And we’ll just have a little  
chat for a few minutes, but we do want to put it out to the audience. I guess Peter, one  
of the things that I was wondering, what are the criteria, especially in private practice,  
that you set up to decide when to tell a client, ‘Okay, it’s time to reprint’? Like, what are  
the things that you set out?

00:45: PETER MUSTARDO: Well, I think with the degraded color, which we can’t do  
anything to rectify, we suggest that as the first of action. Obviously, there’s no magic  
sauce that we have that is going to bring that back. So in those instances, it’s easy.  
When we can’t do anything, we suggest they go back to the representing gallery or the  
artist and inquire about the possibility of a reprint, and then we’re done. With damaged  
photographs, it’s different because we can make things better. A little bit better. But  
again, in treating these things as physical objects, there’s always a limit and there’s  
always a sign of a scar there. The repairs are never perfect. So then it’s about these  
expectations and what the client is willing to accept. Anyway, so in that respect, we  
make that division between damage and deterioration. But it’s difficult. The pieces  
come to us, the clients want some improvements made. It’s not always possible.
LEHTINEN: Yeah. And I thought it was interesting, especially with Markus, the way you were describing your definition of the original. Can you talk about that a little bit more in this context, and how it's defined for you?

02:12: MARKUS MUELLER: Yeah. We discuss a lot of our view on the original, especially with the artist, because often we have the discussion with the institution about reprinting and all the artists need help from the producer with this discussion. And that’s why have a very open view, because when you have a print in your collection, you just know this print. And I’m sure the other edition copies look totally different because at the moment, it's normal to print it on demand, and the artists always change something. And when you don’t know that, then you say, 'Okay, this is the original, because all of them look like the copy I have.' But I’m sure it is not like this. It’s more totally different. So then we do a reprint and it looks a little bit different or we change some parts in the picture. For example, the contrast or to make it sharper or to have a better resolution or something like that. I think it’s okay because all the other works, the other edition copies, are also not always the same. And that’s why I think we have to have—especially we as recom Art, we have a very open mind to this topic because we know what we do every day and it’s not like the idea that all the pictures are always the same when it’s an edition or ten or six or something like that. It’s totally different.

LEHTINEN: Mm-hm. And you’ve also mentioned that you’ve noticed a difference in the attitude of reprinting or toward reprinting in Europe versus the United States, based on your work.

04:21: MUELLER: Yeah. I was a little bit worried if our view is totally aggressive or modern or something like that, because in Europe, they are very conservative. I don’t know if it’s the right name. Yeah, okay. And I was really surprised that the MoMA has a very open view on the reprinting topic. We know in Europe that Netherlands is also very
MUELLER (Cont.): open-minded, so— But the rest of Europe is— They see just the original—for them, the original print they have in their collection—and don’t realize that there are five more or ten more, and they don’t look if the other ones are always the same. So I was really surprised that you guys have a very open mind to this topic.

LEHTINEN: And I guess for both of you, one last thought too is, what kind of conflicts or even controversies in your years working on this question have you observed? Are there specific cases that you could mention or specific examples?

05:41: MUSTARDO: I’ve seen some things which I cannot divulge in detail, but—

LEHTINEN: I tried.

MUSTARDO: No, no. But this issue of birth date and print date I think is critical. And it affects the market. You know, I understand why some photographers might want to only indicate the birth date, the birthdate of when the image was generated, created initially. But when that gap between a birth date and a print date starts to stretch into decades, twenty or thirty years, then you’ve got pristine photographs that have a date from 1975. Something’s not quite right. You know, you can sense it, you feel it. But I think the market needs to be more transparent in making sure that those dates are labeled as such, because it has effect on the price of photographs at auction and various other venues. So I’d like to see more of that. And it affects us because these photographs come to us for reports; we have to write something. And we can’t say this is not a print from 1977. We can say it seems in exceptionally, extraordinarily pristine condition for anything from 1977, to make it through forty-some years without a trace of physical damage. So anyway, more transparency, I think, would be nice to see happen. I almost feel like, as I mentioned, it should be kind of a legal requirement.
LEHTINEN: Mm-hm..

07:18: MUELLER: Yeah, I think it’s very important to put all details as a label or something like that on the print, because the normal daily work is that the artist sold their work, then they go into the storage, put out of the last two prints, which they produced for ten years ago. Then we open the box and say, ‘Okay, we’ll do it again.’ And when it’s made, for example, by a negative, it’s not possible because we have no chromogenic prints which paper which is made for a negative; it’s just made for the LightJet, for the digital printing. So we don’t get from the original negative, the same color like ten years ago because there was always two different papers. There was a paper for the negative and a paper for the LightJet. And we still have the LightJet paper. So then we have two possibilities: to make a new negative from the original scanned file, or we scan the negative and correct it and do a new negative to produce on this paper; or we do it by LightJet. So normally, we do it by LightJet. And I’m sure nobody knows that it’s made by LightJet. There are some experts, they realize if it’s an analog print or a digital print. But for example, we changed our LightJet system to get quite the same result than on a negative, so it’s really hard for you to find out if it’s digital or not. And so nobody knows what it is and everyone thinks, okay, it’s an original print from a negative. And I think this is one of the big problems, that there is no clear communication between the producers to the artists, and also the artists to the galleries or to the buyer and so on. And it is very important to have a production sheet which is filled out by the producer, because I’m sure that most artists don’t know anything about the production stuff. So that’s why I think we have to change it. It’s very important.

LEHTINEN: Mm-hm. Maybe we’ll take this opportunity now to put some questions out to the audience.
10:08: AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering, Peter, can you explain what happened to that LeWitt Print? That was so degraded. What happened?

MUSTARDO: It was poorly processed and there’s extensive oxidation. I think someone here at SFMOMA probably could answer the same question. But yeah, it’s silver gelatin. It’s finely-divided metallic silver. They’re very sensitive, and if not processed correctly, they can degrade catastrophically. Technically, he wasn’t a photographer. It wasn’t his métier. He used photography in his work, but the object quality of the print was not of concern to him. So they readily agreed upon reprints.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is that an RC-based black and white print?

11:01: MUSTARDO: I believe it was, yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Because it looks like light-induced.

MUSTARDO: Yeah. Well, light-induced degradation is common, right? But fortunately, again, he was very clear in this. I wish others had been as clear with instructions on what to do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you so much for the presentations. So many questions, I feel like, swirling out there. And this is partly for you on the panel, but also just trying to process these questions. So with the artists who are still alive, there is this chance to revisit. With artists who are no longer with us, there’s a real joy. Like for instance, let’s say I own a mammoth-plate Carleton Watkins print that’s completely faded. There’s nothing to do. There’s no negative to go back to, there’s nothing. I can buy a book and enjoy it. And this question of the po— It’s almost like if it’s possible, should it be done? And that feels like the crux. If it’s not possible, we just say, ‘Well, too bad. You’ve got a
AUDIENCE MEMBER (Cont.): faded mammoth-plate print.’ Maybe you’ll find one. Great. Maybe a museum is the place where you go visit it. Great. And it’s just that sort of question that seems so in the air. Should it be done? Should every negative be revisited in every archive that exists? I’m not sure. For the artists that are still alive, they’re wrestling with that question. Should I revisit all of my work, or should I make new work with new technology? And many artists are doing both. And it feels like there is that question. I think for this question of what was the original artist’s intent— I mean, it made me think, were the salt prints that Fox Talbot made the exact things that he had in his imagination? Did he want them to look like that? Probably not. But he was excited by the fact that he got anything on a piece of paper. And so I think this— I don’t know, I don’t want to just start rambling, but I do think there are all of these questions, and the market does play into it. And how to advise patrons who have supported the arts and supported artists? What is the advice one gives for materials that have faded? And I think that being in the private sector, you’re both advising artists on how to produce things, and then advising— Peter, you’re advising owners what to do with them. I do think that those are all great questions. And I know it’s difficult for you to—

13:58: MUSTARDO: Well, your comment about the Watkins print, for example. With the technologies available today, you could make essentially a facsimile, a surrogate Carleton Watkins that is going to fool nine curators out of ten, from arms distance, behind glass, on a wall. The question is the transparency, the effect that has on the market, if it’s not transparently marked or noted. You know, we had one print come through not long ago that was marked “HC,” which is a term I hadn’t really been aware of. Excuse my French, but this meant Hors de Commerce. Somebody had this and brought it in for treatment. What does that mean? You know, should I have called the FBI? I can’t. This is not for me to do. But the technology’s there to make surrogates that are almost indistinguishable. The point is for private appreciation. When they hit the market, then things change. It’s a complex issue.
15:22: SARAH MEISTER: Well, I’m sure— I was going to say, I have time to speak later, so I don’t really need to talk now. But to your point, the museums used to release press prints for every exhibition we organized. And nine times out of ten, those press prints were made from by the photographers, from the original negatives, like that Edward Weston that— And I see those all the time. You feel like, hey, look at this MoMA print. You know, it says right here, “Return to the department of public relations.” And I’m like, we’ll that worked out well. So I think— But at least they’re labeled, you know. And so I think the transparency in how they are described and labeled is really important. And as someone— You know, I have friends, private friends, who come to me and say, “Well, I really want this. I can’t afford it.” And I say, “Well, cut a page out of a nice book and frame it and stick it on the wall. And let me tell you, you’ll fool a lot of the people a lot of the time.” But it’s your responsibility to know and to note and to record that properly. And the more the technology advances, the more we all need to take that responsibility seriously.

16:38: AUDIENCE MEMBER: Have you ever had requests to intensify, like a nineteenth century print, an albumen print? And [inaudible] ethical questions regarding that. [inaudible] stance that was not ethical to intensify prints, because first of all, we don’t know what the original print looked like, and the artist isn’t there.

MUSTARDO: Right, and it’s not reversible.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Peter, real quick, can you repeat that question for the crowd?

MUSTARDO: The question was whether we had been asked to intensify specifically nineteenth century photographs. But it could apply to twentieth century, as well. No, because I think we chartered, staked out our territory long ago, when this was perhaps
MUSTARDO (Cont.): a more pressing issue, that chemical treatments of that nature are not something that we’ve been involved in, that we do, basically. So I think there are a few conservators who are pushing the envelope a little bit, more inclined to do that, with the authorization of a client who says, ‘Oh, it’s okay. Look, I have a faded photo. It’s worth nothing. Do what you can with it.’ Well, again, at The Better Image, we don’t do that. It’s a line we’ve kind of drawn in the sand. And as I say, the same can hold true with twentieth century degraded silver gelatin photographs. Bleaching, redeveloping, intensification and so on. You know, it’s complex. But basically, we don’t encourage that, so we don’t do it.

18:15: AUDIENCE MEMBER: I had a question for Markus. I’m wondering how far back your database goes for printing, and whether you’ve had the experience at this point where you were going to reprint and the paper or the ink set doesn’t exist, the originally-used ink set. And whether that actually happens within. If you’re printing on demand, does it happen where the first print is actually not made in the same way as the last?

MUELLER: So our modern database, which you saw in the presentation, we have till two years. But the rest is a little bit— It’s not so nice in a database. It’s more on paper or it’s a digital Word or a PDF or something like that. But we have all the files. So we have a very big room [in] which we store a lot of data, a lot of files. And I’m sure we have maximum, around 90% of everything produced. And this is also a very big problem, because it needs a lot of space to store all the test strips and files, and it costs a lot of money. And normally, the artists don’t pay for it. But we know now that the problem with the damaged artworks is common. And I’m sure when you have it, you have a big advantage, because you can do it easily. And the second question was—?
AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was just wondering if when you’ve gone to reprint, you no longer have that inkjet paper available or the ink sets have changed.

20:06: MUELLER: Yeah, this is a very big problem. In my experience, mostly the artist doesn’t care if it’s the exact paper; it has to look like the same. For example, no artist said to me, ‘Oh, the new Kodak digital paper looks totally different.’ So it is a little bit different because it’s not so yellow, like in the nineties. But they don’t care. And we have more the problem with the inkjet papers because the production is totally different from year to year. And we have also many inkjet papers which we can’t buy anymore because of some problems in the market or— For example, last year we had a lot of problems that the Asian market buys a lot of inkjet paper, so we didn’t get it. And we have a big storage of our materials, but when we do a big exhibition, sometimes we don’t have enough rolls. So then we have to look if there is a paper who looks like the same. And in my experience, for the artist, it’s more important that it’s a matte or it’s a glossy or a semi-glossy paper. And sometimes a client says, ‘Okay, I don’t like the paper because of the structure.” But mostly, for them it’s more important that the colors are right, and not if the paper is exactly the same.

LEHTINEN: Okay, we might need to— We’re at time. So thank you both so much for— And thank you all for the questions in the audience. [applause]