A Conservator’s Perspective on Reprinting Color Photography
Friday, May 10, 2019

Speaker
Peter Mustardo, Director, The Better Image

00:04 PETER MUSTARDO: I’m delighted to be here, among many friends and colleagues, for this very timely and important symposium, as part of SFMOMA’s Artist Initiative. I’m a bit uncomfortable to be representing the private sector, as there are many more-qualified persons than I am from that large arena. There are many allied professionals that we work with whose opinion we need to include—appraisers, galleries, estates, insurance adjusters, and lawyers, to name only a few. However, I can represent my private conservation practice, which is increasingly affected by the issues we are here to discuss. I was concerned, I am concerned, about what to present in only fifteen minutes on this topic, as we have years of examples of damaged and degraded color materials that have come to our studio, many of which have been candidates for reprinting. I’ll show some of these, but thought that I should concentrate on the broad themes and the many questions that I have, in the hopes of stimulating the conversation and advancing viable and thoughtful approaches to these complex issues.

01:12: The Better Image is a private photographic conservation practice. We’ve been operating for the past twenty-eight years, and have worked closely with many institutional, corporate, and private clients, to recover both monetary and aesthetic value from damaged color photographs. Along the way, we’ve seen most of the major color processes—pigment prints, C-prints, Polaroids, dye transfers, silver dye-bleach, and hand-colored and manipulated works, and increasingly, inkjet prints as well.

01:45: We’ve also encountered a wide variety of problems. As these two images show, we also deal with a wide range of photographs, from mundane family snapshots like
this fire-damaged portrait, to sublime works of art, like this wonderful image by Richard Misrach, and it seems almost everything in between these two extremes. In this discussion of reprinting, these are the main points I’d like to make. Many of them have been covered already, so it might be a bit repetitive, but these are important terms in determining what can or should be reprinted. I’ll talk about the important distinction between an image and a physical print, and the implications this has on whether or not to reprint; about the difference between damage and deterioration, and how those differences inform a physical treatment or a reprinting decision. This will be illustrated with examples of damage and photochemical deterioration. I’ll also mention the complicating factors of various presentation styles and mounting systems, including Diasec and thin plastic laminates, lightbox constructions, and the rare and disappearing commercial processes that we encounter. There will be a brief plea for increased communication between artists, conservators, galleries, estates, and colleagues across the related professions—printers, mounters, appraisers, lawyers, and insurance companies, all of whom we deal with fairly regularly. And then I’ll end with an appeal for that ounce of prevention that might make the action of reprinting, if not unnecessary, than at least certainly less frequent.

03:25: In their fascinating forty-year study entitled Object:Photo, of over 340 photographs at the New York Museum of Modern Art’s Thomas Walther Collection, Lee Ann Daffner, here today, and her colleagues, describe the extreme depths that one could go into, exploring the physical nature of these prints. The photograph as a physical object was their concern. I’m glad someone other than just me went back to Szarkowski’s work in the mid-seventies. But this tendency of objectification, maybe even the fetishization, of the print is forecast in the landmark book, William Eggleston’s Guide, in which John Szarkowski wrote, I quote, “Whatever else a photograph may be about, it is inevitably about the print, the container and the vehicle of its meaning.” This is clearly a statement coming from an old analog physical print guy. He was definitely
not a member of the Pictures Generation, with their emphasis on the image over the object. It will surprise no one that as photograph conservators, we are much more interested in the actual container, in this vehicle, than in the image itself. We leave that heated discussion to curators and critics. We strive to understand the facts, the mechanics of how these vehicles are made, their chemistry, their physical properties, and the many deterioration mechanisms to which they are prone, and then to make responsible treatment interventions when warranted. A knowledge of their physical characteristics is important to devise and undertake the limited treatments that are available to us. We deal with a lot of planar deformations, and must know the difference between resin-coated prints and fiber-based prints; how to humidify and flatten either; how and why adhesives fail and what to do about that, as when an early Polacolor print, your right, is delaminating, detaching from its original mount. Abrasions. I don’t want to scare anybody, but we’re in private practice here. Abrasions, accretions, tears, losses, punctures, creases, folds, spindling, and other mutilations abound in the private sector. I believe—I believe; I hope—these are much more rarely encountered in most museum collections. Here’s a standard C-print, a chromogenic print, with abrasions. This is a silver dye-bleach with a little gouge. And this is a unique Polaroid that has been punctured repeatedly, of a mugshot of Pee-wee Herman, which was found in the trash and then later had a new life. We see a lot of this. And then there’s always the problem of broken glass. In this case, of a lacerated Nan Goldin print, its treatment is complicated by the process, silver dye-bleach, and necessitated by her decision not to reprint her images. Oftentimes, a reprinted image, though desirable, is not possible, for any number of reasons.

06:45: Many damaged photographs can be treated, but always and only to some extent. It’s important for us to communicate with our clientele, whose expertise and interests vary widely, and to discuss what is possible. Because for the most part, none of these chromogenic surfaces admit of perfect repairs. I like to say, and it’s been mentioned
already, that these are industrial, manufactured surfaces. They’re not human constructions. And try as we may, as careful as we can be, any handwork is always going to be visible. Managing, by which I usually mean lowering, expectations is very important. We’ve found it to be far better to lower expectations and then to exceed them than to raise hopes and then to disappoint. Here’s a compensation of a damaged silver dye-bleach photograph being done as carefully as we can. But we can make improvements only. This long, deep scratch in the soft acrylic face of a very chromogenic Diasec mounted photograph by Thomas Ruff was repaired, but only to some extent. The evidence is always there upon close examination. This particular photograph was treated after a number of years and discussions between various parties. But it was ultimately resold at auction after our treatment was completely. Should a reprint have been made? I don’t know. Was our repair disqualifying? Well, apparently not. I mean, it sold on the market, so although the damage was visible, it still found a new home.

08:30: Here are damaged corners on a large flush-mounted print mounted to aluminum, which suffered after a fall. I say like Humpty-Dumpty, these deformed corners do no go back together again. It’s practically impossible to get this back into plane, then to re-adhere the print to its metallic substrate, without obvious evidence. Is this a candidate for reprinting, or does one live with the damage? Is creative framing a possibility, overriding the artist’s intent to present this unframed? I can make suggestions, but I’m not sure I should be doing this in isolation.

09:14: And then there are the complicating factors of size and presentation techniques, which have already been mentioned. The size of a print will matter, and must be factored into any treatment or reprinting decision. Again, how much damage is disqualifying? When seen or not seen from a proper viewing distance—These are very large photographs. Of course, you’re going to notice flaws if you’re within two or three
feet of them. But this concept of proper viewing distance, we use a lot. What are the costs involved in reproducing a print of this size and mounting it in this fashion? What does the artist say? Are the artists contacted to make these decisions?

10:01: This lightbox conservation is an example of both a printing process and a presentation method that are both complicated, involved, and increasingly difficult to replicate. And again, the degree of damage must be weighed. Is this small gouge into a laminated surface reason enough to reprint? And you can see it’s a fairly large laminated chromogenic material, with a little nick out of the bottom, that came to us for treatment. And we did what we could to rectify it. I apologize for the color imbalance. But here’s the gouged and furrowed print, a plastic laminate layer; and then a repair, again, to the best of our abilities. But was this sufficient? Would the artist object? Or would the artist be pleased that a reprint was averted? Again, in private practice, there’s usually neither the time nor colleagues available with whom to discuss these types of things, prior to this photograph being offered at an auction house for sale after a treatment.

11:17: And to continue with presentation methods in common practice, thin plastic laminates also complicate matters. They can and do degrade. They can become cloudy, sticky, soften, and detach from the photographic substrate, often while the underlying print rests protected from these ravages. Theoretically, and only theoretically, these can be treated by removing the laminate. But this presents considerable risks and many complicated issues to consider. What to do after a laminate is removed? Does one re-laminate the photograph? Frame the glaze the photograph? What were the artist’s intentions and what is desirable? What is allowable? Who is the arbiter? Who makes these decisions? In a private practice, it’s difficult to discuss these matters.
12:13: So damages can be addressed to various degrees. However, deterioration, especially fading, yellowing, or shifting of color materials, is beyond our abilities to remedy. I only wish we had a magic solution, believe me, to remedy these problems. But in these cases, reprinting becomes a viable option to consider. Here, this anonymous, unframed, and unmatted chromogenic print shows very typical color loss in the central image area, which is rarely noticeable, except when contrasted to the perimeter, which was protected from exposure by the widow matt and now reveals the original color saturation. This close-up illustrates the point. Caused by overexposure and exacerbated, no doubt, by adverse environmental conditions, this type of color degradation is very, very common in the outside world. And the startling and sad discovery usually happens only when a print is about to change hands. But again, who decides when a reprint is needed? How determines the degree of loss that’s acceptable? The artist? The owner? The auction house? The gallery? An estate? What does the insurance company say when this print is brought in for a damage claim? Who’s responsible? What do the appraisers say when asked to determine whether this is a total loss or if there’s been a measurable and defendable loss in monetary value? Can it be reprinted? Who makes that decision? Who makes that reprint? Who certifies, marks, or identifies it as such? Who gives it the artist’s imprimatur when the artist is no longer alive? In our practice, we can only write our condition report, give our opinion on the likely causal factors, and emphasize that no treatment is possible to remedy this type of degradation. And then we present a report back to our disappointed clients. The examples are many. I don’t need to belabor the point. But here, it’s a little less evident.

14:16: The decision to reprint some contemporary work is relatively straightforward. What complicates matters more are increasingly rare and more difficult processes and presentation methods to reproduce. When reprints of the images captured using these rare or unique processes are needed, a lot of thought, deliberation, and coordination among all parties involved is necessary. This is a four-color carbon print by Paul
Outerbridge. But the same holds true for many chromogenic processes that are being discontinued or phased out by the industry, such as the dye transfer print by Eliot Porter and the silver dye-bleach by Adam Fuss, and these unique prints, such as this Polaroid portrait. True facsimile reproductions are not possible, and treatment may be the only recourse in these instances, accepting and perhaps embracing the inevitable scars that will remain.

15:15: Another class of unique works are those with hand-applied color. This print is one panel of a multi-panel work by Gilbert and George. The hand-applied dye—This is a dyed black and white photograph. Again, shows the considerable color loss, but only in contrast to where it was protected by the edge of a frame. Again, that’s a fairly major loss in color saturation. Difficult to reprint indeed. Does one simply reframe it? Accept the color loss? Pass the baton on and hope for the best?

15:50: Communication, transparency, artist’s intent is all very important and discussed already. When we put our names of written documents, we want to make sure what we’re seeing. The inclusion of both a birth date and a print date, I feel, should be required on any reprint, maybe legally required. I don’t have much time, so I’m going to speed through a little bit. But these two points of birth dates and print dates, I think, are very important. Openness, transparency are needed for the historical record, for clarity, and for the establishment of a fair and level market upon which to value any photographic object. This approach makes for a richer understanding of any artist’s work and enhances the field of photo history as a whole.

16:42: Perhaps a classic and prime example of an artist communicating in writing his wishes in perpetuity is Sol LeWitt. This black and white print came to us in this condition, pretty severely degraded, obviously was in need of restoration, something that we could not handle. And before proceeding to reprint, discussions were held with
the LeWitt Foundation, who sent us a copy of a letter in which he explained his restoration philosophy. It stated, and I quote, “I don’t want to get sentimental about it. The reproduction is as good as, and should be considered as, the original.” What welcome clarity. The print on your left side is a surrogate made by Chicago Albumen Works, with whom we work closely on projects of this nature.

17:32: As I say, I don’t have a lot of time, but in closing, as a conservator, I felt I needed to make a comment about the importance of preservation, which has been brought up by others today, and I appreciate that. Much of this whole discussion could be rendered moot, or at least much less frequent, if more attention were paid to the proper storage, handling, transportation, and exhibition of color materials. Perhaps we would not—We would not need to consider reprinting so often if color could be kept in a better state of preservation. Preservation, which is the foundation of any museum and should be a top priority for collectors, as well. The benefits of cool, cold, or freezer storage can’t be disputed; they’re based in hard science. Although vexing complications arise, as many of you with cold storage facilities understand all too well. But the benefits are worthwhile. Thoughtful handling, storage, and installation practices are also important to prevent damage and degradation. This Thomas Demand photograph is in a very corporate and potentially very dangerous setting. Sliding chairs, belt buckles, umbrellas—things happen in the private world. Another corporate client’s offices with 24/7 illumination. Yet another dangerous or short-sighted installation. What do they think’s going to happen to this color photograph over time? The private field is filled with less than ideal practices, indeed.

19:10: So I’d like to end—I think I’m pretty close to my time—I’d like to end with some images and words by a contemporary artist, David Wolf, who I believe is in the audience today. These are two unique chromogenic prints, using expired color papers from the 1980s, from his series *The Afterlife of Things*, discarded, collected, assembled.
Regarding these unique works, David writes, and I quote, “With The Afterlife of Things, I exploit the random marks and color shifts characteristic of expired papers to explore the materiality of things and the nature of photographic materials. As traditional darkroom practice slips towards novelty, I draw a parallel between discarded objects and discontinued papers as a metaphor for impermanence and mortality. The Afterlife of Things is, in essence, about photography itself, both its practice and means of representation, its history and its place in contemporary art.” End of quote.

20:14: I would agree that, as John Szarkowski stated more than forty years ago as color photography was coming into its own, that the vehicle is indeed important and worthy of retention and study, even if conditions and circumstances conspire to require reprinting of a color photograph for exhibition, for resale, or any other purposes. These two photographic objects would be difficult to reprint without altering their meaning and presenting us with something less resonant and rich to ponder. As Joni Mitchell said way back when, “There's something lost and something gained in living every day.” Thank you for your attention. I look forward to any questions you might have. And I did want to thank both my dear partner, collaborator and inspiration, Nora Kennedy, who could not be here today; and also thank the staff of The Better Image on the East Coast and the West. Thank you. [applause]