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Reproduction and Framing

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Conservation of Photographic Artwork by John Baldessari: Two Strategies — Reproduction and Framing

Monica Marchesi

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Abstract: The article focuses on the thirty-year reproduction history of John Baldessari's work *Vices and Virtues (for Giotto)*. It examines the importance of material authenticity as a significant aspect of artwork over time and questions how this feature influences preservation strategies adopted by curators—from reproduction to framing. It also examines what happens when unframed artwork is framed and whether perception of the artwork changes by its framing.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents the preliminary results of the Ph.D. research titled *Reproduction as a Conservation Strategy for Photographic artworks*, which deals with the alleged reproducibility of analogue photographic artworks. The study is affiliated with the project *Photographs and Preservation: How to Save Photographic Artworks for the Future?*, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. This larger project consists of three interrelated subprojects and investigates post-1960s photographic artworks from three perspectives: art historical, chemical, and conservational. It focuses on artworks where the photographic medium contributes substantially to the art object, to which additional different materials (paint, tape, etc.) may have been applied. (Digital photography is beyond the scope of this research and this article, and the terms *photography* and *photograph* refer only to analogue, silver-based technology photography, except as otherwise stated.)

This article concentrates on John Baldessari's work *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)*, 1981, in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. By examining the work's conservation and display history, the article poses questions of how and when material authenticity becomes a predominant value. Does this value influence the preservation strategy and, if so, how? Does an originally unframed artwork change when framed? Does framing change the artwork's perception?

1. VIRTUES AND VICES (FOR GIOTTO)

Virtues and Vices (for Giotto) is a unique series consisting of fourteen silver gelatin prints printed on baryta paper. Figure 1 shows the work, during display, in its unframed condition.

Each photograph of the series is 76 x 76 cm and is glued at the back onto a sheet of foam board of the same dimension. Each photograph is divided into two sections: a black-and-white photograph and a white area. In the white area, above or underneath the photographic image, black capital letters have been applied onto the surface by using the dry transfer letter technique. The resulting word on each photograph represents either a virtue or a vice. The title refers to a work by the Italian painter Giotto in the Arena chapel at Padua, and it is an artistic homage to this artist whom Baldessari so greatly admires.

2. CONSERVATION HISTORY

From a material point of view, the unframed photo-work is very sensitive to handling. Because of the mounting on foam board, incorrect handling can easily cause damage such as dents and disfiguring marks on the photographs' surfaces. The series does not have a hanging system; therefore, the photographs have to be carefully attached to a wall, with all the risks that accompany this practice. Because of its inherent material weakness, the care of this work has proven to be challenging.

In 1984 and 1989, damages on the surfaces were reported in the Van Abbemuseum's internal records. Both incidents occurred during installation when the artwork was on loan to other museums. On both occasions, the curators of the museum asked Baldessari about the possibility of reprinting the photographs. In 1992, the artist agreed to reprint a new series. Because of financial constraints, it was established that a new set of photographs would be printed in Los Angeles, home base of the artist, directly from the negatives and without comparison to the first



Fig. 1. John Baldessari, *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)*, 1981, unframed. Collection of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Image: Peter Cox, Eindhoven.



Fig. 2. Second print uncropped and without application of the dry transfer letters. Image: Rik Klein Gotink.

set of photographs. The museum in the Netherlands would take care of the cropping and the application of the dry letter transfers on the front. When the new photographs arrived at the museum and were compared with the 1981 prints, differences in surface texture, tonality, and size were detected. The museum's curator rejected the 1992 set and this was never finished or exhibited. One of these prints is shown in figure 2.

In 2000, a new museum curator, in order to find a solution for this delicate artwork, looked again at the possibility of reprinting new photographs or reusing the 1992 photographs. Baldessari was keen to reprint the artwork again, but because of technological changes in the field of photography, he suggested digitizing the existing negatives, adding the written text in the digital files, and making ink-jet prints of the photographs together with the texts. The museum staff, after consultation with a freelance photograph conservator, dismissed the artist's proposal due to the technical and material differences there would be between the two set of prints. In the meantime, the museum staff inquired about the availability of dry transfer letters that would match the font and size of the letters used in 1981. After extensive research, they could not find acceptable letters that could be applied on the surface of the 1992 prints. The ideas for a possible duplication of the artwork were for the moment put on hold, and the 1981 photographs continued to be exhibited. In 2006, during another loan, new damages along the edges were detected. In 2007, after more consultation and encouragement from the artist, the Van Abbemuseum decided to frame the original, unframed prints. Since then the work has been displayed framed several times, during various exhibitions.

3. CHALLENGES TO CONSERVATION:

3.1 REPRODUCTION

In the lapse of time between the first reported damage in 1984 and the decision to frame each photograph in 2007, the museum employees approached the preservation of this delicate work of art in different manners. By analyzing the conservation history of *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)*, it is possible to observe changes in meanings and decisions.

Is a photographic artwork mainly defined by its images or by its constituent materials? This remains an open question even for the artist who produced the artwork and for the caretakers in the museum. As Barbara Savedoff remarks, photographs are multipliable media: from a negative it is possible to produce different series of prints. Photographic prints are multipliable, but this does not imply that the various prints are identical. Photographs do multiply the object's image, but they are not multipliable objects. However, most of the time photographs are used for their documentary value to convey information. They are also commonly enlarged, downsized, cropped, photocopied, or (nowadays) digitally transmitted. According to Savedoff, these manipulative actions have a lasting influence on the way people view and regard photography. Surface, scale, and tonal characteristics are considered mostly of little concern and only a few professionals worry about differences in the quality of the reproduced photographs (Savedoff 2000, 174–177). This attitude is at odds, however, with the general stand of professionals in the field of photographic material conservation, who tend to view a photograph as an object as well as a carrier of an image (Romer 2010, 109). This case study perfectly illustrates this ambiguity toward photographic artworks and whether these should be considered as multipliable or unique

objects. Baldessari, as a living artist, shows little concern about the possibility of duplicating the artwork at another time and with different materials and techniques. Even the curatorial staff does not have a well-defined stand on this issue, promoting, at the beginning, possible duplications and ending in revering the original form when technical changes prove too extreme. What appears to be problematic is how far in time and technology a reproduction can be in order to be still accepted as a genuine replacement of the original and not as an inaccurate imitation.

This case study also shows how appreciation of the object's materiality is time-related. During the first years in the life of Baldessari's artwork, curators were mostly worried with the pristine look of the photographs; with the passage of time, however, surface, tonal, and technical features became increasingly important. As the work got older, its 'historicization' began to take place. When the artwork was recently made and not yet historically recognized, no signs of aging were accepted, but when it became older and its value started to be recognized in the art market and the museum field, signs of aging became acceptable (Pugliese et al. 2011, 5). This attitude shift can also be described in terms that Alois Riegl used a century ago: at the beginning, curators gave predominance to the *newness value* of the artwork, but they ended up preferring the *historical value* of the object. In this revaluation process, the artwork becomes also a testimony of bygone times and production methods. The predominance of one value over the others will shape the decision-making regarding the artwork. As Michael Von der Goltz concludes in his essay, these values are context-bounded: decision making may change with the people involved, as well as with the passage of time (Von der Goltz 2010, 61). The change in attitude can also be described in the terms proposed by Glenn Wharton and Harvey Molotch, who observe that initially the authenticity of materials is a feature with low status, but over time this feature gains importance and reaches high status (Wharton and Molotch 2009, 212–214). They prioritize the conservation efforts within an installation by giving a status to elements forming an installation. High-status elements are crucial for the work; without these, the artwork loses meaning. Conversely, low-status elements are considered of secondary or incidental importance. As the authors rightly observe, the prioritization occurs also in general conservation practice. Both sets of terms show how decision making is influenced by external factors and how these factors are influenced by predominance of a different values at different moments in time. By giving a different value, the caretakers give a different meaning to the object, and then they act according to the value given.

3.2 FRAMING

To frame an object such as a painting, a drawing, or a photographic print looks like a simple and straightforward way to protect it. A frame also allows a safe way to secure the object to a wall using a hanging system incorporated at the back. Along with the practical aspects, a frame opens a series of aesthetic and theoretical questions that have been addressed in the course of the centuries by artists, curators, and art critics. A frame has been experienced differently in various historical periods: as a unifying factor that holds elements together during the art of late antiquity and the Middle Ages; a liaison between the representation and that which is beyond the frame in Renaissance art; and a necessary border, a boundary between pictorial space and the disturbance from outside in 17th-century French academic painting.

With the Modernist era, artistic expressions began to strive for autonomy and isolation. Due to the blurring of boundaries between art and real life, physical or conceptual framing has become much needed. Inappropriate display can contradict or diminish the anticipated effect as well as the meaning and interpretation of a work of art. With the shift from traditional art (where the audience is able to ‘read’ the artworks even if they are displayed in different contexts) to less predefined artistic expressions, artists are nowadays increasingly involved in the presentation of their creations. Frames are, therefore, more than just protective or decorative elements around the pictorial plane. A frame can define a conceptual space.

Within the conservation world, the framing of two-dimensional objects is a widely accepted and established practice, seen as a viable, well-thought-out preventive measure that helps conservators to control and manage the immediate environment surrounding the artwork and therefore to affect the rate of change that the artifact undergoes. Most of the time, framing belongs to the realm of preventive conservation practices because it is said not to change the material aspects of the work, and it maintains the artworks in its physical and chemical form, preventing any further deterioration. Framing fits well in the definition of *minimal intervention* so popular in contemporary conservation discourse. But as Salvador Muñoz Viñas argues, ‘minimal intervention’ is an oxymoron and therefore not realizable. What is achievable is to intervene to a certain extent. The extent is determined by taste, preferences, and expectations of empowered decision makers. (Muñoz Viñas 2009, 49–50).

The framing of *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)* should therefore be seen as an intervention according to the predominant taste and the preferences of decision makers who regard framing as a ‘neutral’ action that does not affect the content or field of the artwork. To frame an originally unframed artwork seems like an innocuous action, but frames need not be perceived as such by the audience to have an influence on artworks. A frame not only adds materials around, behind, and often in front of the object, but it can also add layers of meanings. It is a vehicle that suggests

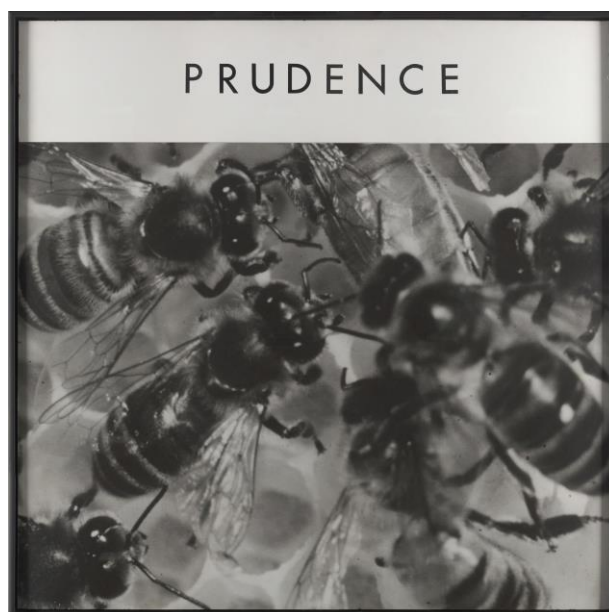


Fig. 3. *Prudence*, first print, framed seen from the front. Image: Rik Klein Gotink.



Fig. 4. First print framed seen from the back. Image: Rik Klein Gotink.

status, prestige, and importance, being conventionally a sign of ‘high’ art, or to use Baldessari’s phrase, it ‘throws out art signals.’ (Baldessari 2012, 154). To add black frames around Baldessari’s fourteen photographs in what could be called a ‘gallery/museum style’ could also (partially) interrupt the internal dialogue within the series. (Geraghty 2009, 140–149). Ian Geraghty uses the term ‘gallery/museum-style’ to describe a conventional type of frame that aspires to neutrality and invisibility, matching the contemporary taste. Encapsulating each photograph within a frame somehow interrupts the relationships among the photographs. The changes are not only perceptible theoretically but are also felt at an aesthetic level. The ‘look and feel’ of the fourteen photographs is changed. The addition of a frame, and in particular of the glazing in front, increases the distance between the museum visitors and the artwork. The interposition of a glazing increases the idea of photography as an image, as a window on reality, and decreases the materiality of the artwork with its physical and handmade elements, such as the dry transfer letters added on the surface of the prints. The framed print, seen from the front and the back, is shown in figures 3 and 4.

4. ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

For the sake of completeness, it should be stressed that apart from the above-mentioned options (to reprint from negatives or to frame unframed photographs), another conservation choice exists. The other option, which is the only one that really fits the definition of preventive conservation, is to keep the artwork unframed. In order to manage the risk of damage at an acceptable level, though, the artwork should be accompanied by an extensive description of its proper installation and, when it is sent on loan, it would have to be escorted by a trained courier. This latter need is of great importance, as the documentation available at the museum shows that all the damages occurred when external personnel, who were not sufficiently aware of the work’s fragility, hung the photographs.

5. CONCLUSION

Conservation has its roots in both natural sciences and the humanities. The choices around conservation go beyond the physical needs of the object because they are linked to the art historical tradition and cultural heritage context. These choices are influenced by the predominance of certain values at different moments in time: by assigning a different value, the caretakers give a different meaning to the object. By analyzing the shift in attitudes of the curatorial staff of the Van Abbemuseum between 1981 and 2007, it is possible to reconstruct the different meanings and values that were given to *Virtues and Vices (for Giotto)*. Each consecutive curator looked into the possibility of reprinting the fourteen black-and-white photographs, and by doing so, acknowledged and accepted the reproducibility of the photographic medium. Material and technical authenticity changed from a feature with a *low status* to one with *high status*. The shifting predominance of specific values influenced the preservation strategies adopted by the curators: from reproduction to framing, yet both approaches have an impact on the artwork. An extensive description of the artwork’s installation together with the escorting by a trained courier, when the photographs are sent on loan, is proposed in this article as a possible alternative strategy.

With a careful assessment of the different conservation options, the empowered decision makers should evaluate and prioritize which value is given predominance: the preservation of the artwork's appearance or the preservation of its authentic materials. The decision should not be dictated by an automatic reaction that to frame an object is a better, safer option. With the addition of frames, the artwork is 'musealized': it is adapted to satisfy museum requirements—to be displayed, stored, and shipped in an easier way (Desvalleés and Mairesse, 2010, 50-52). It is necessary to keep in mind, as Bente Kiilerich stated, 'if the unframed condition is a required part of the picture, the very absence of a frame, the nonframe, is not parergonal [referring to something that is both inside and outside the work (Derrida, 1978)], but part of the art-work' (Kiilerich 2001, 321). Thus the unframed condition has to be carefully assessed before it is given up.

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