SYMPOSIUM: THE MATERIALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHS

5-6 APR 2018

ORGANIZED BY THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM AND LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

Detail of Ger van Elk - Russian Diplomacy, 1974, chromogenic photograph with application of acrylic paint, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Photo: Rik Klein Gotink
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PROGRAM    Thursday 5 April 2018

10 – 10.45 am  REGISTRATION SYMPOSIUM
Registration in the museum entrance hall, 
coffee & tea in the Teijin Auditorium

10.45 – 11 am  WELCOME & INTRODUCTION
Kitty Zijlmans (UL) and Sandra Weerdenburg (SMA)
project leaders of the ‘Photographs and Preservation’ research

11 am  1. FIRST SESSION
11 – 11.35 am  Lecture, key-note 1 Liz Wells (University of Plymouth)

Photographs articulate the past/elsewhere through the present/here and now. They have a complex and fluid relation to people, places and histories, as do artworks that incorporate the photographic. In recent years, in part as a response to image-flow and the dematerialization of the image as object, interest in materiality and the multi-sensory has challenged and complemented theoretical preoccupations with iconicity and indexicality. This turn to the phenomenological has foregrounded interest in photography as a means of investigation through image-making. It has also framed debates relating to the necessity and value of the conservation of photographic artifacts within the museum and archive sector. Referencing examples from landscape, place and environment, Liz Wells will reflect on the inherent mutability of the photograph as an object and on the implications of this for contemporary theoretical enquiry.

11.35 – 12.45 pm  VISIT TO THE EXHIBITION
Forever Young? The Impermanence in Photography
introduction by Hripsime Visser (SMA) curator of the exhibition

12.45 – 2 pm  Lunch break

2 pm  2. SECOND SESSION
2 – 2.35 pm  Lecture, speaker 1 Monica Marchesi (SMA)

Photographs, because of their chemical make-up, are inherently unstable. The process of degradation is relatively fast and cannot be reversed. This puts both artists and conservators in a difficult position. The idea of reproducing old photographs in order to be able to present them ‘the way they were meant when first created’ is attractive to many contemporary artists, as well to museums. However, the concept of the reproduction of photographic artworks as a fountain of eternal youth that protracts a flawless condition is not without problems. This talk examines the
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reproduction of four photographic artworks as a conservation strategy, from the vantage point of a conservator working in a museum of contemporary art.

2.35 – 3.10 pm Lecture, speaker 2 Katrin Pietsch (Fotomuseum, Rotterdam)

In the late 1970s, Polaroid built a prototype camera that was able to produce prints of 20x24 inch in size. Meant only to demonstrate the quality of their Polacolor film material, it soon developed into an instrument for artists to produce unique Polaroid prints of tremendous image quality. Only six of these cameras were ever produced, and they were placed in several studios all across the world. But Polaroid went even bigger. Around the same time, they built a room-size camera at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts which was able to produce 40x80 inch prints. Shortly after the bankruptcy of Polaroid, the camera had to be taken down because production of the film material had been discontinued. Some of the 20x24 studios are still running today, using up the last stock of the Polaroid film material they managed to obtain in 2008. The author was able to perform research into the technique within a project that involved the conservation of some 40x80 and 20x24 Polaroids made by the artist Ulay. This presentation will show the details of this nearly unknown and fascinating technique. The issues and questions concerning the conservation of this unique and un reproducible material will be discussed. Extensive discussions with Ulay himself have clarified that the materiality of these photographs has played an important part in the artist’s decision-making processes.

3.10 – 3.40 pm Coffee & tea break

3.40 – 4.15 pm Lecture, speaker 3 Pip Laurenson (TATE/UM)

Contemporary photographic artworks rely on industrial processes for their production, however the networks and relationships between people, processes, skills and materials underpinning these works remain under-acknowledged and under-explored. What do we understand about the fragility of the social and material networks underpinning the production of photographs in contemporary art photography? Drawing on a research collaboration between the anthropologist Haidy Geismar, the conservator Pip Laurenson and the artist Catherine Yass, this paper explores the making of Yass’s Corridors (1994), a series of colour display transparency light boxes in Tate’s collection. As we started to think about photography as a series of techniques and materials that come together to create particular effects and that are dependent upon complex social and material networks, as well as different kinds of embodied skills, we also started to ask,
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does conservation practice need to better understand these networks, skills and materials and how would this inform conservation decision making?

4.15 – 4.50 pm  3. THIRD SESSION
Lecture, speaker 4 Maartje van den Heuvel (UL)

The oldest photo collection in the Netherlands is embedded in the academic research environment of a university, which however is increasingly digital. Now that photographs can be viewed online, which are the fascinating material values of photography that researchers and curators still travel to Leiden for? We discern three material values of historical photography that also give insight into material aspects of contemporary photography: 1) Emotion: the photograph or object bears emotional value of preciousness because special materials or craftmanship have been put into it; 2) Historical sensation or the relic-value: the photographic object has witnessed a particular history according to traces on it or accompanying information; 3) Interaction: the photographic object requires interactive handling in order to be thoroughly understood. Examples shown vary from daguerreotypes to folding and box cameras and a graphoscope, and range from the 19th century to precious prints and digital experiments of today.

4.50 – 5.10 pm  Concluding remarks first day
5.10 pm  End first day

PROGRAM  Friday 6 April 2018

10 – 10.35 am  REGISTRATION & INTRODUCTION
Registration in the museum entrance hall, coffee & tea in the Teijin Auditorium

10.35 am  1. FIRST SESSION
10.35 – 11.15 am  Lecture, key-note 2 Jan Baetens (KU Leuven)

At first sight, the specific medium of the film photo novel, that is the reissue in (traditional) photo novel format of original movies, a cultural practice that was extremely popular in the second half of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, raises all the questions that emerge when discussing the materiality of photographic archives: issues of material fragility and decay, authorship and authenticity, completeness and value. At the same time, the utterly uncanonical status of this corpus, sometimes described as the “lumpen” version of what is generally considered an illegitimate genre, namely the sentimental photo novel, gives the
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opportunity to ask different questions, having to do with the very definition of key notions such as: photography, photographic record, photographic archive, etc. In this sense, the film photo novel opens a range of questions that continues – yet in a very different direction – Rosalind Krauss’s question on the discursive spaces of photography.

11.15 – 11.50 am  Lecture, speaker 5 Helen Westgeest (UL)

Applying paint to the surface of photographs has a long history. In the formative years of photography, color was added to the black-and-white images. Even when paint covered the whole surface, these pictures were still considered to be photographs. The post-1960s artworks in which paint is added to photographs, are also still discussed as photographs, but ‘overpainting’ served other and more diverse goals than just compensating the absence of color. Particularly the expressive applications of paint turned the artworks into hybrid pictures in which photographic aspects in the image are confronted with painting-like aspects on the image. Do we perceive these pictures as ‘duck-rabbit’ visual challenges, or are we experiencing new visual entities? And how do expectations related to conventions in painting and photography influence the meanings of the subject of the partly overpainted photographs? These questions will be discussed on the basis of some contemporary overpainted (but still) photographs.

11.50 – 12.10 pm  Coffee & tea break

12.10 pm  2. SECOND SESSION

12.10 – 12.45 pm  Lecture, speaker 6 Caroline von Courten (UL)

The photowork Dutch Grey (1983/84) by Ger van Elk reminds of a typical Dutch landscape in which a straight horizon parts between the blue-white sky and the green, grey, and black soil. Most of the silver gelatine photographs’ references are hidden behind layers of paint. Still, this vision is established, but the more we engage with the idea of the horizon, the more it appears as a subjective, perceptual construct based on the position of the spectator. By taking the concept of the horizon as a way to approach the actual invisible matter of some of Ger van Elk’s photoworks, the photographic surface becomes itself a horizon. A horizon that holds together the visible and the invisible parts of a photowork and therewith represents or, more accurately, embodies their mutual entanglement. This talk delves into the many layers of materials, times, and gestures that shape a photowork and seeks theoretical connotations that align to its complex materiality and multi-layered thickness.

12.45 – 2 pm  Lunch
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2 – 2.35 pm Lecture, speaker 7 Clara von Waldthausen (UVA)

Artists and art institutions have at times found the fading of chromogenic photographs unacceptable and as a conservation strategy have chosen to reprint faded photographs. In doing so modern digital methods may be implemented as analog means have become limited. The faded chromogenic photograph is thereby replaced by reprinting onto modern papers and techniques. This paper aims to suggest a novel approach within the collection management of contemporary art photography. Namely, that the framework of terminology that has been established within black & white photography be adopted into contemporary fine art photography to ensure the preservation of all photographic prints made from a particular negative. A brief background in the collecting of photography, as fine art medium will be given, after which, the terminology surrounding black and white photography will be discussed. Via examples of reprinting chromogenic works this author will address the question, is it not simply possible to revisit the negative and print a new photograph that coexists with previous examples (as is the case of black and white photography), instead of reprinting and replacing the earlier versions?

2.35 – 3.15 pm Lecture, speaker 8 Cecilia Jespers (Sherwin Williams)

Photoworks are works of art consisting of (analog) photographs combined with another material, such as paints. These complex artworks may show several signs of aging, making them unsuitable for exhibition. In this research, two types of aging are investigated: efflorescence and discoloration. Efflorescence is a phenomenon observed as white crystals growing on the artwork. It was found that these crystals consist of the products of a chemical reaction between water and fatty acids in an acidic environment. Discoloration was studied using model systems: synthesis of generalized forms of yellow, magenta and cyan dyes found in analogue photographs allowed for detailed study of their degradation patterns. Treatment with several possible pollutants was performed, in particular, the presence of acetic acid breaks down the photographic dyes, discoloring the original artwork. A suggested improvement for the preservation of these artworks is the development of an intake form where relevant information of current and new photoworks can be stored.

3.15 – 3.45 pm Coffee & tea break

3.45 – 4.20 pm 3. THIRD SESSION Lecture, speaker 9 Saskia Asser (Huis Marseille and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)
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It seems so simple. A curator of photography at the Rijksmuseum buys primarily retrospectively, that is: vintage photographs in their most authentic form and in a pristine condition. A curator at Huis Marseille only buys contemporary photography, which is by definition authentic and pristine. The Rijksmuseum keeps a reference collection, which means that many photographs will never be exhibited and will only leave the air-conditioned depot to be studied in the study room. Huis Marseille however owns an exhibition collection. The majority of the works is mounted and framed mostly done so or commissioned by the artists themselves. This makes the situation not so simple anymore, and not only from a conservational point of view. It brings a whole range of dilemmas to the fore which also touch upon the authenticity and the reproducibility of a photograph and how to deal with the ‘patina of time’, so important for the experience of an authentic work of art.

4.20 – 5.15 pm Round table discussion with artists Koos van Breukel, Berend Strik & Katja Mater. Introduction + Moderator: Hripsime Visser (SMA)

5.15 – 5.35 pm 4. CLOSING REMARKS
Concluding remarks conference

5.35 pm End of the conference, drinks at Zadelhoff Café

BIOGRAPHIES

Saskia Asser studied art history at the University in Leiden, specialising in the history of photography. After graduating, she worked as a researcher at the Rijksmuseum, creating an online catalogue of all early photographs in Dutch collections. In 1999, she became the first curator of Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography in Amsterdam. After more than twelve years, she went to World Press Photo to create a new online environment for the archive of winning images. In 2016, Saskia returned to Huis Marseille as a curator. Since October 2016, she is also a curator of photography at the Rijksmuseum and the editor of the Rijksmuseum Studies in Photography.

Jan Baetens is professor of cultural studies at the University of Leuven, where he mainly works on French poetry and its institutions, on the one hand, and word and image relationships, on the other hand. He is interested in “minor” forms of visual narrative, such as novelizations, photo novels, and comics. Some recent books are: A Voix haute. Poésie et lecture publique (2016) and Novelization. From Film to Novel (2018). He is also a published poet, doing in practice what he studies in theory, and has recently published a novel, Faire secession (2017), based on Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War.

Koos Breukel studied at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, after which he began working as a freelance photographer based in Amsterdam. He specialized in portrait
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photography, exploring where people stand in life and how they cope with the traces that life has left behind. Recently he is working in cooperation with the library of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam to combine books from their collection with portraits from his collection. In this project he searches for the ambit in a certain period in both collections.

Maartje van den Heuvel is curator of the Leiden University photocollection and guest curator of exhibitions in various museum in the Netherlands and abroad. While her special interest lies in contemporary photography, her exhibitions and publications as well focus on pictorial traditions in photography but also in painting from the past. In 2018, she will complete her PhD research on Dutch contemporary landscape photography.

Cecilia Jespers studied Chemistry at the Utrecht University, with a focus on organic chemistry during her masters. It was the rare combination of analysis of artworks and synthesis of molecules that appealed to her in the research performed for her master's thesis: the study of the chemical degradation processes of photographic artworks. After graduation she continued her work with colors as a Mixing Color Chemist in the automotive paint industry at the research and development department of Sherwin Williams in Lelystad.

Pip Laurendon has over twenty years of experience in the conservation of contemporary art, in her current role as Head of Collection Care Research she develops, leads and supports research related to the conservation and management of Tate's collections. In January 2016 Pip also took up a special chair as Professor of Art, Collection and Care at Maastricht University. She received her doctorate from University College London, is an accredited member of the Institute for Conservation, a National Heritage Science Forum (UK) trustee, and is on the Steering Committee of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA).

Monica Marchesi works as a paper conservator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Her research interests lie in conservation history and theory, museum practice, preservation and conservation of paper and photographic artworks. In 2011 she initiated the research project 'Preservation & Photographs: How to Save Photographic Works of Art for the Future?' together with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Leiden University, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. As a result, she was awarded a doctoral degree at the University Leiden after the completion of the dissertation Forever Young. The Reproduction of Photographic Artworks as a Conservation Strategy in 2017.

Katja Mater’s practice focuses on the parameters of photography from a meta-perspective. By creating hybrids between photography and other media, she documents something that often is positioned beyond our human ability to see. Mediating between time, space, perception and performance, she records events that simultaneously can and cannot be—holding midway between information and interpretation.

Katrin Pietsch studied conservation of photography, film and data carriers at the University of Applied Science, Berlin. She finished the 4 year program with a diploma
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in 2007. During her studies she worked on a research project on the conservation of photographic negatives for 2 years. After her studies she started to work as a photograph conservator at the Dutch Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The museum holds a collection of about 5 million photographs, for the biggest part original negatives of Dutch photographers. The conservation studio works for the museum itself as well as for external parties like both private clients and companies / institutions with photographic collections.

Berend Strik studied at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam and the ISCP, New York. He received the following prizes: Elisabeth van Thuringen Prize, Dorothea von Stetten Kunstpreis and Charlotte Köhler Prize. Strik has been the subject of solo exhibitions at a.o. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Vleeshal, Middelburg; Kabinett, Zurich and Oslo Museum, Oslo. He took part in the Biennale de Lyon, Lyon; and participated in group shows at a.o. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; SMAK, Gent; Mudam Luxembourg; de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam; Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; Kunstmuseum, Bonn; FRAC, Montpellier; Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; MuHKA, Antwerpen.

Clara von Waldthausen received her MA in Conservation from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in the specialization Photograph Conservation. Since 2001 she is the director of the Fotorestauratie Atelier VOF that provides services in photograph conservation and in the digitization of fragile art and archive collections. Von Waldthausen designed the MA Programme in Photograph Conservation at the University of Amsterdam and has taught there as part-time Lecturer from 2014 onwards. Recently she succeeded Suzanne Maarschalkerweerd to become the Director of the Conservation Programme at the UvA. Her past research includes: the identification of varnish and waxed coatings on 19th century paper photographs, the conservation of flaking emulsions on autochrome plates, disaster salvage of the photograph collections, and most recently the conservation and preservation of faded color photographs in art collections.

Sandra Weerdenburg studied Art History in Utrecht and was afterwards trained as a conservator at the ‘Five-year postgraduate diploma course’ at the Limburg Conservation Institute (SRAL), Maastricht (Netherlands) in cooperation with the ‘Training Institute for Conservators’ in Amsterdam. After having worked in several Dutch museums she has been working at the Stedelijk Museum since 1996, first as a sculpture conservator, and since 2006 as head of the Conservation Department. In this last capacity she has been co-projectleader, together with prof. Dr. K. Zijlmans (Leiden University), of the project ‘Photographs and Preservation: How to save photographic artworks for the future?’

Helen Westgeest is associate professor of modern and contemporary art history and photography theory at Leiden University. She also works as field editor for photography at caa.reviews. Her most recent book publication is Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2016. Her next book Slow Painting: Contemplation and Critique in the Digital Age will be published by I.B.Tauris by the end of this year. The title of the new manuscript suggests a big swing, but
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corcepts and debates from the field of photography and video art are part of the theoretical framework of her arguments about the selected contemporary paintings.

Liz wells writes and lectures on photographic practices. She edited The Photography Reader (2003), Photography: A Critical Introduction(2015 5th ed.), and co-edits photographies, Routledge journals. Publications on landscape include Land Matters, Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity(2011). Exhibitions as curator include, Light Touch, BWI Airport (2014); Sense of Place, European Landscape Photography (BOZAR, Brussels, 2012). She is Professor in Photographic Culture, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Plymouth University, UK, and a member of the research group for Land/Water and the Visual Arts. www.landwater-research.co.uk She is an elected member of the Board of Directors, Society for Photographic Education.

Kitty Zijlmanis is Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory/World Art Studies at Leiden University since 2000. From January 2011-September 2014 she was Academic Director of LUCAS, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. In 2010 she was accepted as member of the KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and since 2017 Chair of the Domain of the Humanities within the KNAW. She is member of the Supervisory Board of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst Utrecht, the Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht and the Boekman Foundation Amsterdam. Her fields of interest are contemporary art, art theory, and methodology. She is especially interested in the ongoing intercultural processes and the globalization of the (art) world, and increasingly collaborates and exchanges with artists in the context of the field of artistic research. From 2012-2017 together with Sandra Weerdenburg of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, she was leader of the NWO/Science4Arts project ‘Photographs and Preservation: How to save photographic artworks for the future?’
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ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM
This two-day symposium aims to foster lively, interdisciplinary dialogue about the impact that materiality has on collection care issues as well as on the overall experience of photographic artworks. How does material change over time, and how do these changes influence the interpretation of the artworks? This event intends to present, through papers, panel discussion, and a visit to the exhibition Forever Young? Impermanence in Photography the results of the research project “Photographs and Preservation. How to Save Photographic Artworks for the Future?”. By promoting conversations between artists, art historians, conservators and researchers, the symposium aspires to raise awareness about the beauty and the distinctive impermanent character of photography.

CONTEXT
The research Photographs and Preservation focused on analog photography, specifically post-1960s photographic artworks to which different materials were applied, such as various paints, varnishes, pressure sensitive tapes, or paper. From a conservation perspective there are still many unanswered questions about the care that these works need and will need in the future. During the research project, conservators, art historians, and chemists jointly examined these multimedia photographs. The research was conducted by the universities of Leiden and Utrecht and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

CREDITS
The research and the symposium were generously funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and supported by the Kröller Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Dutch Cultural Agency (RCE), and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The project was part of the Science4Arts program, which encouraged multi-disciplinary research into preventive and active conservation.