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Publication date

2012

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The artist interview: for conservation and presentation of contemporary art: guidelines and practice

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Stigter, S. (2012). Reflections on the artist interview and the conservator's point of view by example of Ger van Elk. In L. Beerkens, P. 't Hoen, IJ. Hummelen, V. van Saaze, T. Scholte, & S. Stigter (Eds.), *The artist interview: for conservation and presentation of contemporary art: guidelines and practice* (pp. 102-111). Jap Sam Books.

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ARTIST INTERVIEW WITH GER VAN ELK

In this article, the dialogue between the art conservator and the artist discloses the differences between the artist's and the conservator's practice in connection with Ger van Elk's oeuvre. Who is deciding as to what should be done with a conceptual work of art: the conservator on behalf of the owner, with a responsibility to art history, or the artist on behalf of his intellectual ownership? By making the choices and the different interests more explicit during decision-making, a valuable document of historical interest is created that can also be used for future preservation issues regarding Van Elk's work. While the conservator has a preservation-oriented approach based on a direct relation between idea, time and material appearance of the artwork, the artist may have entirely different considerations for the future of his work. Van Elk clearly opposes traditional conservation ethics and approaches his work dynamically. If a work is damaged beyond repair, a joint strategy may indeed be sought in order to re-create the work, whereby the damaged original remains untouched and is stored in the archives. Does this present a new role for the conservator as the intermediary informing the public with regard to later adjustments? Analysing, documenting and communicating thus seem to become increasingly important in the conservation practice of contemporary art. Interviewing the assistant – in this case also a conservator – is very useful to obtain additional data as well, particularly regarding the creative process and the artist's working method, which, for example, brings to light how material particularities and chance contributed to the final appearance of the work.

THE ARTIST

Ger van Elk (Amsterdam, 1941) is one of the Netherlands' most important conceptual artists. His work is included in national and international collections. His rich oeuvre includes minimal installation-like sculptures in relation to the site and our perception, massive sandwich sculptures made of planks with framed photos wedged between them and flabby wall sculptures as deformed paintings including photographic images, but also painted photo works, slide installations and film. Van Elk plays with themes from art history and visual conventions in the way in which reality is portrayed. Meanwhile, he also uses concepts from his oeuvre in his new works, whereby he always uses the latest imaging techniques.

THE INTERVIEW

The interview with Ger van Elk took place on April 4, 2003, in the artist's former studio in Amsterdam. Discussed in particular are film and photo works, whether or not painted, retouched or processed by using digital applications. This article deals with the relationship between artist, conservator and artist assistant, ideas about re-execution, the relation between copy and original, and the interview as a 'co-production'. In preparation to the interview, Sanneke Stigter interviewed paper conservator André van Oort, also Van Elk's former assistant, in the paper conservation studio of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam on March 15, 2002.

THE INTERVIEWERS

Piet de Jonge, at that time Head of Collection and Presentation of the Kröller-Müller Museum.
Sanneke Stigter, lecturer and programme leader of the MA Conservation in Contemporary Art at the University of Amsterdam at that time conservator at the Kröller-Müller Museum.

Reflections on the Artist Interview and the Conservator's Point of View by Example of Ger van Elk

SANNEKE STIGTER

Introduction

Ger van Elk is regarded as a conceptual artist, although the relationship between the material execution and the concept contributes significantly to the final work of art. He creates painterly or sculptural artworks and installations in which photography, film and video are incorporated in an unconventional way. His work became internationally known when he participated in high-profile exhibitions, such as *Op losse schroeven* and *When Attitude Becomes Form* in 1969. Soon after this he worked in Los Angeles, together with Bas Jan Ader, where he took up the medium of photography for the first time in order to visualise his ideas. The significance of his work lies in a visual play involving the relationship between artwork and reality, in which the traditions and the mechanism of representation in art are examined. The quality of the image must be perfect to obtain the intended effect, but due to the degradation of the photographic material this is often no longer the case. Therefore, the core of the conservation problem of his work is whether photographic components should be replaced and if so, in which manner this should be done. This is problematic since the photographs are incorporated in three-dimensional structures and have been painted on as well, which makes it clear that these are unique works that cannot simply be reproduced.

Knowledge Before the Interview

Prior to the oeuvre interview, Ger van Elk has indicated in a conversation that he uses 'renewal as a style' in relationship to his need to 'bring more precision' into his work.¹ In 2002, for example, he digitally processed a number of old films for his *Flatscreen project*, which had to become moving photos on flat screens framed with a mat. Van Elk does not only take works from his own oeuvre as a starting point for new works, but he has also re-created old works, such as *The Well-Shaven Cactus*. Originally, this was a performance enacted by Van Elk himself at the opening of *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1969 and the idea was filmed by Gary Schum for his compilation for television entitled *Identifications* in 1970. Twenty-five years later, in 1996, Van Elk created a new video work based on the same theme, whereby he did not try to copy the old work, but instead reused the concept and now shaved the cactus with a razor blade instead of an electric shaver. In this version the artist himself is visually present, connecting his appearance at that specific moment to the time of creation.²

Ger van Elk's need to bring more precision into his works, as he calls it, seems to be interwoven with the way in which damaged works have been re-created at his initiative by digital imaging techniques when traditional restoration methods offered no solution for the seriously discoloured photographs in his work. This has been carried out for *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973), an important work from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The work was originally created as a collage of colour photographs, with airbrush and photo retouching techniques, creating a miraculous picture of the artist playing a grand piano, while the piano is deforming and the artist's tailcoat is floating in the air. Such manipulated photos caused quite a stir in those days. The picture postcard made of it was the museum's best sold one for many years. However, the old colour photographs have discoloured to such a degree that the magic of the image has been lost entirely [FIGURE 1].



Contemporary image manipulation techniques have been used for the new version produced in 2000. The artwork has been digitally scanned in its entirety and printed in one piece on high-gloss photographic paper. The initial seams are not visible anymore, since they have been digitally retouched. Thus, 'more precision' has been brought into the work. For form's sake, the photo has been airbrushed, although this has nothing to do with the initial masking function for which this technique was used originally. The new version was created in close consultation between the artist and the former paper conservator of the Stedelijk Museum André van Oort, who used to be Ger van Elk's assistant. (see **Interview with Artist's Assistant**, page 111). The new work has been authorised and signed at the back with a new date. The original work has remained untouched, but it is no longer visible for the public. The surface quality of the new version is remotely connected to the original material appearance, because no trace is left of the original working method. Only the 'story' in the image still stands. The question now is what this means exactly for the artwork and the public: they are viewing an idea from 1973 in a makeover from 2000. This causes friction.

Conservator's Point of View - Then

Preparing for the artist interview, I was very much aware of the fact that Ger van Elk believes that the idea is central to his work and that he does not like to discuss any attribution of meaning to the work's material appearance. The original version may be less relevant to Van Elk or even disturbing if he is not very happy about it in retrospect. Apart from that, he always sees new challenges in the rapid development of new photographic and digital imaging techniques. I considered it a risk for the integrity of the original artwork if the artist were to advocate 'restorations' based on the new artistic possibilities of contemporary imaging techniques. A conservator distances himself from interfering in artistic processes in an artwork out of respect for the authentic object and because of the pitfalls in interpretation of the original work of art. Artistry and restoration should not be intermingled.

As if he wants to challenge traditional restoration ethics³, Ger van Elk proposes treating a possible discolouration of the photograph from *Bouquet Anvers* in the same way as *C'est moi qui fait la musique*. He created this work as a comment on the 'genre' in painting, both in terms of subject matter – the flower still life – and a style of painting – Pollock's *drippings* [FIGURE 2]. The painting technique is thus clearly part of the expressive power of the work. But then Van Elk must have thought, 'the flatter, the more interesting' and he passionately fantasises about the possibilities of 3D scanning techniques imitating the impasto of the paint spatters. The artist's curiosity about all these possibilities makes the tension between the artist's freedom and the conservator's conservatism apparent.

Reflection

In my double role as interviewer and as conservator, I wanted to hear from the artist that the chosen materials and techniques indeed contributed to the meaning in his work. Van Elk's artworks comment on their own material appearance in a sophisticated and often witty way. The *Missing Persons* series from 1975, for example, is based on the manipulative character of airbrush in photography.⁴ Today, the digital image processing techniques are challenging Van Elk and are of great influence to his new work, as is clearly demonstrated in the interview. For a series of landscapes he deliberately uses the numeric colour system in image processing programmes. Van Elk allocates a '0' to the colour of the horizon in the landscape, because it actually does not exist – you cannot reach the horizon. Therefore, the colour of the landscape fans out into a horizontal line with 'zero' colour before the sky reveals itself in colours again.⁵ (SEE STILLS PAGE 40)

At the same time, I realised that Van Elk would be prepared for my questions about the meaning of materials. He is clearly alert during the interview and indeed notices what he calls a trick question when he is persuaded to discuss the almost historical value of the material expression resulting from the making process of *La Pièce*. He painted this famous 'little block' white in two stages on a rolling boat at sea in 1971, at the most dust-free spot in

FIGURE 1 *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973), condition January 2002, colour photos and airbrush on paper, 60 x 120 cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. PHOTO Sanneke Stigter
FIGURE 2 *Bouquet Anvers* (1982), colour photo with enamel paint on rigid polystyrene board in wooden frame, 118 x 115 x 7 cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
 PHOTO Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam



the world, in order to create a work of art as minimal as possible with the grandest gesture imaginable [FIGURE 3].

La Pièce

This is what Ger van Elk says about *La Pièce*:

Van Elk 'I don't think it's [...] painted very neatly, actually. ... I know why that is. I did it at sea, and this boat was rolling crazy. It's impossible to paint neatly then.'

In reply to the question whether the sloppy brush strokes are part of the work's expression, referring to the circumstances in which it was painted, he initially says,

Van Elk 'Yes, I believe so. Yes.' But then he continues,

'But, it's not at all about this little piece, is it. That only represents... No way this is art. It is just a piece of soap! What do I know?'

Although the materiality of the conceptual artwork is trivialised, the questions are continued.

Stigter 'May that be painted over?'

Van Elk 'Well, that is a trick question, isn't it? I got your number, but in this case, I would... I don't think that'll ever be necessary.' [...] 'Well, look, if it's not white anymore and has by accident ended up in the fireplace, then I would neatly saw another block and paint it white again.'

De Jonge 'Yes, you would. But, what if you're dead?'

Van Elk 'The same.'

De Jonge 'It can be done again then?'

Van Elk 'Yes. ... If you really take it all the way, you should go to exactly that same spot marked on the map on the ocean, and take that can of paint along and do it again. Oh well, what do I know?'

Stigter 'You think this is all nonsense, don't you?'

De Jonge 'It's too far away from you.'

Van Elk 'Well, I enjoy you guys doing it this way, but it's such a different mindset and mentality. Yes, I make so-called art as an expression of my life. I don't have those hierarchic values, I don't invent them, others do. Fortunately, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to make a living. But as it is expensive and all that, I can live of it a little and I can keep on making things like this. But I just see it as sculpted poetry. It's a story; after all, this isn't art, is it. This is just a little block! It's not an oil painting.'

FIGURE 3 Photo of Ger van Elk taken January 1971 by Evelien de Vries-Robbé during the creation process of *La Pièce*, a deliberate registration as part of the idea of the artwork. Kröller-Müller Museum.

FIGURE 4 *La Pièce* (1971), painted block of beech on velvet pillow on wooden console with Perspex cover. Kröller-Müller Museum. **PHOTO** Marjon Gemmeke / Kröller-Müller Museum.

Conservator's Point of View - Now

What is actually going on here? Why do I, as a conservator, want to defend the material side of the work of art so much? This is based on the traditional idea of conserving and freezing the authentic object. The artist's hand is visible in this; the traces of the making process can be read from it. The whole idea of the work of art is enclosed within the material object, which, in the case of *La Pièce*, is presented by Van Elk on a dark-red velvet cushion precisely for that reason: a grand gesture for a small, valuable gem that should be handled with care **[FIGURE 4]**. It is not in keeping with the principles of restoration ethics when the artist speaks so indifferently about it.

The way in which *C'est moi qui fait la musique* from 1973 was re-created in 2000 ignores the original creation process and the idea of showing the authentic object. However, you may question the degree to which you simulate the old techniques if reconstruction is chosen as a conservation strategy, as was done in *C'est moi qui fait la musique*. If you don't have the original negatives and you have to make a new version of the object, imitating the old techniques by applying new media is a falsification just as camouflaging the object's technical imperfections by means of new technologies is, as was done when the seams of the collage were smoothed away. Such far-reaching decisions should be founded on thorough decision-making and it would be appropriate to properly inform the public of what they are looking at in solid documentation.

Interviews with the artist and the conservator may provide insight into a museum practice that is usually not accessible for the public at large, but of vital importance to the way the artwork is experienced. Therefore, it may be interesting to publicise information about the decision-making process with regard to conservation treatments. Such sincerity does not need to detract from the conceptual expressive power of the artwork. Emphasising the current state of the artwork makes the work contemporary, places it in its historical context and highlights its original innovative character.

The artist's wishes regarding conservation treatments are not always complied with in conservation practice, especially when a possible intervention affects the material appearance of the artwork. I was therefore surprised at the decision then taken to re-create *C'est moi qui fait la musique* and this largely influenced my thoughts during the interview. In hindsight, I realise that the new version of the work is very valuable, precisely because the artist is still alive and could be involved closely. After all, the original was regarded as a permanent loss since the artist did not want the work to be displayed in a discoloured state any longer, which the condition of the work did not allow anyway. The original negatives were missing, so re-creating the work using the initial techniques was impossible. By the chosen procedure the degraded original artwork is preserved, whilst the creation process of the new version has been well documented. The (new) work is exhibited (again) and reflections on the conservation treatment have been published as well.⁶ In short, the artwork lives on; *C'est moi qui fait la musique* has entered a new phase of its life.

Conclusion

The artist's working method and motivations with regard to conservation issues can be diametrically opposed to the conservator's professional ethics, but this challenges the interviewer to ask about them and to examine the sticking points. Thus, the conservator's traditional practice may become unsettled, similar to the way in which conceptual artists have broken boundaries by taking their own functioning in the art world as a starting point. A central, recurring question concerned the essence and the function of art. Meanwhile, conservators of contemporary art may ask themselves the same question about conservation treatments, particularly when it concerns art that was actually born out of this tradition. Analysis of the oeuvre interview with Ger van Elk has made me realise how directive a conservator can be in emphasising certain aspects of an artwork that may be less relevant to the artist. On the other hand, it shows how Van Elk plays with the conservator's point of

view in preserving the original material object. By analysing the artist interview afterwards, one can make certain choices transparent and recognise the many signs of and possibilities for change during the life of an artwork. Insight into the influence of the dialogue between the conservator and the artist is therefore essential to understand the artwork in both its original and (all of) its potential (non-realised) and final appearance(s).

NOTES

¹ Personal conversation with Ger van Elk, January 31, 2003.

² Ger van Elk, *The Well-Shaven Cactus*, 1970, version 1996, reproduced in: Marente Bloemheuvel (ed.), *Ger van Elk. The Cadillac and the Nun* (Eindhoven / Rotterdam: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum / NAI Publishers, 1999) pp. 14-15.

³ Personal conversation with Ger van Elk, February 2002.

⁴ For example *The Missing Persons-Lunch II*, 1976, retouched photo on paper in passe-partout, 43 x 49 cm., Rabo Art Collection, R 051, reproduced in: Manon Berendse, Verily Klaassen, Marieke van Schijndel (eds), *Unlocked No (1)*, Rabo Art Collection (Eindhoven: Rabobank Netherlands, 2001) p. 26.

⁵ Ger van Elk, *Study for Rotterdam Horizon 0%*, 2001, colour photos and polyurethane lacquer on paper, 37,5 x 274,5 cm. Collection Galerie De Expeditie.

⁶ Sanneke Stigter, 'Living Artist, Living Artwork? Ethical Problems in the Conservation of Colour Photographs in the Work of Ger van Elk', in: Ashok Roy, Perry Smith (eds), *Modern Art, Modern Museums*, Contributions to the Bilbao congress 13-17 September 2004 (London: The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2004) pp. 105-108; Sanneke Stigter, 'Discoloured Colour Photos: Restoration Problems in Ger van Elk's Works', in: *kM 50* (2004) pp. 54-56.



INTERVIEW WITH ARTISTS' ASSISTANT

As part of the oeuvre interview with Ger van Elk, André van Oort was interviewed because he used to be the artists' assistant and currently is paper conservator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. An interview with the artist's assistant is also useful because it provides exact data on materials and methods, which the artist may not remember or in which he is less interested. Aspects regarding the artist's working method, which he would not be very eager to mention himself, such as his own temperament, may be discussed as well. This provides insight into the choices that were made and the solutions that were found for material (im)possibilities during the creative process. Additionally, this interview has also yielded a wealth of information about the restoration history of Van Elk's works, such as about *C'est moi qui fait la musique*, since André van Oort was not only Ger van Elk's assistant, but also carried out a lot of conservation treatments of his work [FIGURE 6].

Van Oort explains how Van Elk once asked him to remove large colour photos attached to plywood because he wanted to use them in a different way. The only technical option appeared to be to split off the top layer from the photographic paper. The result was a thin, flexible photograph. Van Elk thus used a 'technique' discovered by Van Oort for his 'flabby sculptures': new work that could be regarded a crossover between photo, painting and sculpture. Van Oort explains the making process step by step, up to and including the brand names of the products used. During the interview, an interesting picture arises with regard to where, how and with whom the work was done. The enlarged colour photos were soaked in a large triangular shaped bath before they were separated from their paper carriers; the front of the photograph was protected by foil, after which a layer of glue was applied to the back with a lino roller. Next, large strips of linen were glued against it. The entire living room was used as a workspace. Apart from Van Oort, Van Elk's former girlfriend also joined in stitching and hemming the linen. To hang the works, cords were threaded through the hems.

With the detailed information given by Van Oort about materials and methods, a meticulous reconstruction could be made within the framework of the restoration of *Sportive Sculpture* [FIGURE 5]. This practice made it possible to distinguish signs of damage from any defects caused during the creation process, which is of importance for the decision whether or not to restore and preserve specific phenomena. Apart from material-technical details, an interview with a third person about an artist may also provide insight into more psychological aspects that may determine the artistic creation process. Van Oort explains, for example, how Van Elk makes choices during his work and how he deals with setbacks. The interview reveals how unsatisfied Van Elk could be about the quality of the enlargements by the photo lab, but eventually used the prints after all. 'He grumbles a lot first and then he submits to the situation and accepts it. I mean, he didn't really demand everything to be perfect photographically. It was, after all, the idea of the figure that is being shaped and, well, this brightness of the colour was not the main point in this.' This is very valuable information, particularly when you need to validate the artist's statements afterwards.

FIGURE 5 *Sportive Sculpture* (1980), colour photos and acrylic paint, rubber cords, metal tent pole, 375 x 330 x 170 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum. PHOTOS Cary Markerink, Sanneke Stigter / Kröller-Müller Museum

FIGURE 6 André van Oort standing over the new version of *C'est moi qui fait la musique* from 2000 in the paper conservation studio at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, with the original from 1973 in the foreground. PHOTO Sanneke Stigter