

title: Resume case research

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case: Ger van Elk, *The wider the flatter*, 1972

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Resume case research The wider the flatter

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Introduction

'The wider the flatter' by Ger van Elk (1941) from 1972 consists of 10 identical chromogenic colour photographs mounted aluminium strips in front of one another, each describing a wider angle from 90° in the rear to 180° in the front, which is flat. This triangular structure is horizontally positioned into a specific corner in front of the very same spot on the wall that is depicted in the photograph generating a visual doubling. Because of discolouration and physical damage the photographs were in bad condition and the artwork could no longer be displayed. The site-specificity of the artwork was questioned or actually prompted by the artist as well as the museum while discussing the case.

Experience of the artwork

With 'The wider the flatter' Van Elk shows how a real angle in the corner of the museum is visually straightened out by the artwork, replacing reality by its depiction and transforming it at the same time. This means that the idea of the artwork lies within the visual impact that is generated at the moment of perception. It may be clear that the image should be in excellent condition in order to achieve the proper effect.

Material history

'The wider the flatter' was first created for the Van Abbemuseum. Then the photo showed the white painted textile covered walls the work was positioned in front of. The Kröller-Müller Museum acquired the work shortly after this show. The former director of the museum had chosen a new location in accordance with the artist. New photographs were made and replaced the old ones in 1973. A year later the work was lent out to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and exhibited with a picture on the side explaining the context in the Kröller-Müller Museum. After the show the work got damaged. New prints from the old negative did not satisfy the artist and a new picture was made that was used to restore the artwork. Further loan requests were not granted anymore. It was stated that the work was made for this specific site in the museum and thus could not be exhibited outside of this context.

Case research

It could be argued that 'The wider the flatter' had reached its final state upon completion after acquisition, because it was never meant to be temporary. According to the former director there was never a question of moving the artwork around. This is upheld by the

fact that it was the artist himself who asked the work on loan for his show in the Stedelijk without considering interchanging the photographs and to show it accompanied by a photograph of the work explaining its site-specific situation instead.

The artist now says this was wrong. He states that he would like the photographs to be replaced by new ones because of their bad condition and stresses that the original corner once chosen is not an imperative. Any corner may be chosen as long as the photographs on the frame reflect the same corner.

The question is however, was this work intended to be movable? Or is this idea a sign of the times, reflecting the current museum practice, broadening the exhibition potential of the artwork? There is no certificate defining the conditions in case the sculpture would be re-installed elsewhere.

Changing the site and hence the appearance of the artwork cannot be done without regard to its 35 year old history. Why was this site chosen? Does it contribute to the meaning of the artwork? 'The wider the flatter' is positioned in such a way that visitors can observe it from above and below while taking the steps. Another important connection to this site is that it is a passageway that all visitors have to use to get to the core of the collection, the paintings by Vincent van Gogh. The space is narrowed down by Van Elk's sculpture in such a way that the public has to be confronted with his work, whether they like it or not. According to the present director of the museum the idea of art as a disturbing factor suited Van Elk. These additional features do contribute to the experience of the artwork and should be weighed during the decision-making process.

Case research results

What can be concluded from the history of 'The wider the flatter' is that it was never intended to adapt the work for installation elsewhere after acquisition. The site is still there and it was decided not to consider a different location. Because the site had been repainted and the photographs were in such a bad condition that even after conservation they would never be able to generate the desired effect, a new photo was made for the work that was authorized by the artist. The photo was taken with a traditional technical camera, enlarged in an analogue way and printed on chromogenic paper, all similar to the original techniques. Matte paper was chosen, only the silkscreen pattern that characterized the original prints is no longer available. The new photographs are adhered in a reversible way on top of the old photographs of which the gelatine layers have been cleaned and consolidated first. Only the most damaged photograph on the front strip is removed and the one on the rear strip to save the old signature.

Terminology

What can be concluded from the artist's interview is that the specific wall that 'The wider the flatter' is made for is irrelevant, but that it is the visual relation of the wall and the object that is essential to the artwork. This means that 'The wider the flatter' can be characterized as 'site-related' rather than 'site-specific' because to the artist the work could be installed anywhere, as long as the photographs on the aluminium structure correspond to its surroundings. This means that the functionality of the artwork will not be damaged when the architectural setting will change as long as the photographs will be changed correspondingly.

Future

It will probably not be possible to render analogue colour photographs in the future anymore. The artist is indifferent about this, as long the colour matches and the prints are not shiny. To him the grain of the film visible in the enlargement of the negative is of no importance. We should be aware however that these features will be lost in the future because the photographic industry will eventually stop processing analogue photographs, similar to how photographic paper with a 'silkscreen' surface has disappeared already. That is why it was decided to make an extra set of chromogenic prints that are now authorized by the artist while this is still possible. These prints will be kept sealed in cold storage until they are needed in case of future damage. This supply is not endless, but it cannot be guaranteed that the site is left unchanged over time either. A newly made photograph may be needed in the future anyway.

Conclusion

The final conservation treatment is designed around the essential visual balance between the image and reality that is so crucial for the experience of 'The wider the flatter', in combination with the history of the artwork and the intention of the artist.



Ger van Elk posing behind a test print of a new photograph for 'The wider the flatter' in the Kröller-Müller Museum, April 16, 2007. Photo: Sanneke Stigter, KMM

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