

Jean-Christophe Ammann

ON THE AGEING OF WORKS OF ART *

There is a story about an abbot who slept for 300 years. It takes place in the Swiss canton of Wallis. One summer's day the abbot leaves the monastery around midday to go for a walk. Tiredness overcomes him and he lies down for a little nap. When he wakes up, it is already late afternoon. This is very embarrassing for the abbot, since he had left the monastery saying that he would only be gone for a short while. He hurries back.

On reaching the monastery, he can't believe his eyes. The old monastery building has been painted white, the portal has been renovated, the path widened. The abbot is annoyed and can't understand who could have ordered these changes. He knocks at the door and a young brother opens it. "What are you doing here?" asks the abbot. "And besides, who are you, what do you want here?" Astonished, the porter asks what the abbot wants. "Now hold on a minute," replies the abbot harshly, "I'm the abbot of this monastery." The startled porter calls for the other brothers who politely ask for the name of the abbot, who is now becoming increasingly annoyed. The chronicler goes through the list of previous abbots of the monastery and finally finds the name of the abbot standing in front of them. There is no date of death, but the entry reads 'missing'. When the abbot hears that he has slept for three hundred years, he turns to dust.

It may be that some art works will face a similar fate in the future. Or, to put it another way: imagine that we go into the depots to lift works out of their boxes or remove them from their fittings and they turn to dust.

What do we know about the durability of the polyurethane used in the wonderful ensembles by Peter Fischli and David Weiss? How much do we know about the durability of the large-format photographs by Thomas Ruff, which are mounted directly onto perspex – are they resistant to light and how long does the adhesive last? What will Miriam Cahn's large-format works in black crayon drawn on tracing paper look like in the future? How long will the unprotected and chemically untreated drawings last (the artist opposes any form of protection)? Will the paper eventually become brittle with age? What will a work by Dan Flavin look like when the original fluorescent tubes are burnt out but no longer available in the diameter he originally used? How will the character of the work be affected if narrower tubes are used?

The Storyteller (1986) by Jeff Wall has been in our museum since 1991. One day the Canadian photographer Geoffrey James came to visit me and noticed that the cibachrome had faded considerably. I had already suspected this might be the case, though I couldn't be sure because archive photographs in the case of ciba-chromes are not the most reliable material for comparison. Subsequently, Jeff Wall confirmed the poor state of the cibachrome, and with his help we were able to replace it.

Yet it is interesting to note that a cibachrome is supposed to have a life span of between twenty-five and thirty years, yet this one had started to fade after just ten years. How easy it was when artistic materials consisted only of oil on canvas, bronze or stone, or pencil on paper. I won't even mention ball-point pens, because they are of course highly sensitive to light, as the case of Alighiero Boetti shows.

I know of some museums which exhibit their most significant drawings in the form of phototypes. Behind glass and with low lighting so that not even a specialist can distinguish between the original and a phototype. In the seventies I organised an exhibition of Austrian art dating from between 1900 and 1930 for the Lucern Museum of Art, for which I borrowed some drawings by Egon Schiele from Eberhard Kornfeld in Bern. It wasn't until the drawings were hanging on the wall that I noticed a significant difference in the hue in one work, though they were all from the same period. When I checked, it turned out that this was a phototype. I rang Ebi Kornfeld and told him what I'd discovered. He laughed loudly. He only wanted to test me to see if I would notice the difference. The next day the original arrived.

The result might not be so amusing when, in the future, we have to spend the already tight budget for purchases of art works on their conservation and restoration. And, realistically, we have to accept that some works of art – even costly ones – are doomed to destruction.

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