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Comfort in Ambiguity: Observation on the Treatment of Photographs and Electronic Media

Paul Messier¹

The talk will examine the fact that the treatment imperative for some photographs and electronic-based art can be ahead of a complete materials-based and contextual understanding of the work. Photographs are complex objects with numerous intersecting variables that need to be balanced during the course of a successful treatment. These variables are primarily materials-based but are also influenced by the marketplace and curatorial prerogative. Though still a field of rapid, active growth, the field of photograph conservation is mature by comparison to the emerging field of electronic media conservation. Unlike other artistic media that can sustain periods of benign neglect, preservation issues surrounding many electronic-based works of art are accelerated due to the fragility and rapid obsolescence of media and components. While grounded by the core principles that govern contemporary conservation practice, preservation strategies for electronic-based works of art are applied by necessity in the absence of conventional wisdom or history of practice. The complexity of photographs and the accelerated preservation requirement for electronic-based works of art nearly guarantees that any treatment is open for critical examination and reevaluation. At times unnerving, accommodating the fact that there is no single right answer is among the most satisfying and liberating attributes of a treatment conservator's professional life.

¹ Conservator of Photographs, Paul Messier LLC, Boston, MA 02135, USA, 617 782 7110, pm@paulmessier.com