Replicating Schoonhoven: an investigation into the materials and techniques of three small relief works from 1964

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Abstract

An investigation of the materials and techniques of Nul artist Jan Schoonhoven (1914 – 1994) was undertaken as student internship activity while at Rabo Art Collection, Netherlands during May/June 2014. The investigation included making replicas of three small works in the Rabo Art Collection. This paper provides a report on the materials, techniques and rationale selected for the replicas, in order to develop further insights into the conservation of modern and contemporary artworks. The relevance of replicating modern works, implications of ethics and the collection metadata are discussed broadly in reflection on the learning experience.

Image: Screenshot from the film Jan Schoonhoven - Official 18977, Memphis Film and Television, 2005 showing Schoonhoven being interviewed circa 1971
Introduction

The humble white assemblages of Dutch artist Jan Schoonhoven (1914-1994) appear at first glance to be simple geometric abstract reliefs. The sources of the shapes and the method of construction remain mysterious without introduction. Schoonhoven is regarded as one of the most important Dutch artists of the 20th Century, with works in major collections including: Rabobank Kunstcollectie, Nederlands; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London and MOMA, New York to name a few. The titles of the works by number provide no clues as to origins, content or meaning, and the interpretation is not prescriptive. Didactic texts provide information as to the materials used in their construction; cardboard, papier maché and latex paint.

Figure 1: Three works by Jan Schoonhoven, each Untitled, 1964, cardboard, paper, latex paint on wood composite board, each 15 x 10 x 3 cm. Images courtesy: Rabo Kunstcollectie, Rabobank Nederlands

The techniques and materials the artist employed, and their significance, can be investigated with analytical techniques, archival research and through making replicas. Without dissecting or sampling a work, instrumental analysis or interviewing the artist, inspecting the surfaces and imagining the layers, their order, and the process of making was the first step in making replicas.

Imagining, or considering possibilities, was an important preliminary exercise in realising the reconstructions, and was supplemented by viewing other examples, and conducting some research by reading biographical and curatorial texts. Perhaps the artist mimicked in cardboard and papier maché the craftsmanship, precision and joinery of the carpenters, joiners, glaziers and gothic stonemasons from the cathedrals where he took his inspiration. Or perhaps his methods were more humble and required little skill or dexterity?

This paper is designed as a reflective essay on the process and methodology. Existing conservation research on Schoonhoven’s materials and techniques was not accessed. The aim was to see if any new insights can be gained by reducing the potential bias of information.
Replicas of artworks: function and scope

If passable facsimiles are constructed from similar materials, there is no guarantee that the copyist is using the same methods, and it is certainly difficult, if not impossible to use the same historical materials. Therefore, from conservation, historical or curatorial perspectives, it could be argued that replicas are of little use.

However, replicas provide insights into working methods, which can aid in the full characterisation of objects prior to making treatment decisions. They can also serve as the conservation equivalent of movie ‘stunt doubles’. They can be deliberately soiled, aged, dropped, chipped, scratched and over-painted. Copies can therefore provide a useful facility for testing treatment options. For example, performing tests with display options designed to discourage or eliminate touching and soiling, and the testing anti-theft devices. This is especially important on small and highly valuable works. Furthermore, if reconstructive conservation is required on an original, a full working knowledge of successful construction processes is extremely useful. In other words, understanding the materiality of things beyond their compositional chemistry is valuable knowledge.

Lydia Beerkens, conservator and author of Nothing but the Real Thing: Considerations on Copies, Remakes and Replicas in Modern Art, recommends her students make copies of works in order to understand them, and to develop problem-solving skills (Beerkens 2002b, n.p).

During the modern art conservation training programme, many reconstruction exercises are undertaken for educational and research purposes. With the assistance of the artist or a relevant material specialist (for example, a woodworker or blacksmith), to-scale reproductions are made using the same materials and imitating the working techniques employed to create original artworks. Only by actually remaking an artwork can the full extent of the original working processes be understood (Beerkens 2007a, p.1).

This type of activity also reinforces, for conservators, the fallibility of the eye, and that making assumptions based on what we see is not always appropriate. Assumptions based on sight, experience and research can result in far reaching implications, not least of which is damage to materials. As Caple argues: perception, judgement and learning are influenced by bias (2000, Ch. 1).

Methodology

An investigation into the life of the artist revealed Schoonhoven was a Dutch Postal Services employee, who created his works after 5 pm and on weekends. He thrived on routine and it is repetition and order, which played a role in determining his objective, non-hierarchical, non-referential theories. While his modest income allowed him artistic independence, his choice of materials was perhaps a reflection of income and availability (http://artbios.net/7-en.html viewed 31.05.2014). Papier maché, cardboard and house paint form the dominant materials of his white relief works which were often made by assistants after 1967 (citation needed).
It was bearing these things in mind that three of Schoonhoven’s small works from 1964, currently in the Rabobank Kunstcollectie Nederland collection were examined, documented and replicated using materials readily available.

Construction

The three Schoonhoven works, illustrated in Figure 1, were closely inspected, using sight and touch noting textures, joins, variations in paint application, colour, weight and ‘feel’ of the objects. They were measured, drawn and photographed for reference. Materials were selected on the basis of availability, and close proximity to what would have been available to the artist. A proprietary wallpaper paste was a likely original adhesive, methyl cellulose was selected here for similar consistency and working properties.

Step 1: A little maquette

Before commencing construction a 6 cm x 10.5 cm experimental piece was made using cardboard, white gummed paper and plywood. Close inspection of the original revealed that the outside edges were likely to have been made from one continuous strip. This was mimicked by scoring the strip at points of desired folds as in figure 2. The ‘X’ was made by slotting the cardboard together in slits made halfway along the strips. As the shapes would be difficult to position, gummed white paper strips were used to prepare the shape before placing, as seen in figure 3.

The base was then laminated with blotting paper and methyl cellulose, and the outer rectangle was adhered with gummed paper strips, working with the length of the forms. More paper strips were wet and added, with inner corners manipulated using a bamboo skewer. It was difficult to maintain the shapes as the cardboard became wet, and it became apparent that to maintain a neat formal appearance, the artist may have cut the support papers with precision, and developed a consistent application method, which provides tension when aligning the pieces, and allowed for drying time in between layers application. No issues with adhesion were noticed.
Figure 4: test piece after covering with gummed paper

Step 2: Making replicas

Three 15 x 10 x 1.5 cm laminated plywood panels were sanded to remove rough edges, and provide tooth to avoid lack of adhesion when using an aqueous adhesive.

The blocks were covered with white blotting paper applied with methyl cellulose adhesive, as the wood was coated on both sides with a glossy, possibly oil based coating. The cut edges were raw and not covered with blotting paper. It is acknowledged that the wood used by Schoonhoven appears to be raw particle board and the glue probably wallpaper paste.

Strips of cardboard were: cut, joined and laminated with white gummed paper tape, and allowed to air dry under tension to avoid curling and buckling as seen in figure 5.

This process also stiffened the cardboard, which was otherwise a too soft. Some convex curling was noted, but still used, due to time constraints and a lack of alternative materials. It is unlikely the artist worked in this way.
The long strips of laminated cardboard were scored at desired points to facilitate straight corners on the outer rectangle shape. The shortest length was positioned inside the longest end. The first shape (left of image) was adhered using long strips of gummed paper. This led to out of plane warping which was difficult to control. Shorter tabs were used on the second and third rectangles in an attempt to square up the shapes and develop an even tension (refer to Figure 6).

A combination of both methods was more successful in controlling the warping (refer to middle panel in Figure 6). A bamboo skewer was used to push paper into the corners.

Upon drying, delamination of the blotting paper was rectified with application of more methyl cellulose. Gaps were covered by even application of gummed strips to avoid creating areas of differing thicknesses.

The interior shapes were made by; cutting stiffened strips to size, making slots and joining as seen in Figure 7. This seemed a more practical approach than using individually cut pieces, with the aim of creating straight continuous lines held in place with small pieces gummed tape. Corrugated cardboard was used for the thick middle section in the ‘t’ shaped panel.
Short pieces of white gummed tape were used to position the interior constructs and tailored to fit each section, with final placement of pieces much like fitting panes of glass into a window. Small pieces of paper with corresponding cuts were used to unify the joins. Long pieces of tape were then used to unify the layers as seen in Figure 8. This process required continual adjustment and rethinking to minimise the amount of joins. Figure 9 shows this process at near completion, with the face left panel awaiting final insertions into the base of each triangle.

Figure 9: Strategies in minimising joins with gummed tape at different levels of completion

Strips of newspaper were then torn, dipped in dilute methylcellulose, squeegeed through fingers and applied with fingers and brushes. Trimming was done by tearing, and the paper was pressed into corners and smoothed to eliminate air bubbles. A single layer was applied in this way and allowed to dry overnight. Torn areas were patched with small scraps of newspaper, while joins were neatened and reinforced with small scraps, pushed into place while wet with skewers, and squeezed with fingers.

Figure 10: Near completion of papier maché layer
Air pockets, blind cleavages and delaminated areas were pierced with fingernail or lifted to allow adhesive application, and adhered with undiluted methyl cellulose solution and allowed to dry. The replicas were compared with the originals to ensure a similar effect was being made (refer to figure 11). Further patching and adhering of delaminated areas was addressed with more methyl cellulose. It is noted that in 1964, newspapers did not have coloured in print.

![Figure 11: Comparing the originals with the replicas at completed papier maché stage](image)

**Coatings: selection**

Consideration of coating choices included: masking underlying colours of newsprint, high enough viscosity to not drip, low enough viscosity to not leave stiff brush marks, slight sheen and slight yellowed appearance (as evidenced by observation of areas on originals which appeared to have uneven top coat). Acrylic ‘gesso’ was used, with a slight Naples yellow acrylic tint added. The gesso referred to from hereon is an acrylic dispersion, not a traditional gesso, and is therefore written with inverted commas.

The final top coats on the originals appear to be thinner, chalky, matte with no tint, much like ceiling paint. Hema® house paint was selected as although the formulations have changed since 1964, the brand was known to be used by Schoonhoven. It is not clear if the artist applied these at the time of manufacture, or if they were applied by assistants for a more ‘presentable’ look prior to or at the time of exhibition installation, as the artist endorsed this approach (citation needed).
Coatings: application

During brushed application, slightly lifting areas of newsprint were re-adhered using the 'gesso'. Beerkens (pers. corr. 06.06.2014) confirmed that cross sections examined previously indicated this method was also used by Schoonhoven. Extra 'gesso' was applied to cover joins in corners and at joins before feathering with a soft brush.

The subsequent 'gesso' applied had less yellow, and the final coat was with no tint. The 'gesso' used is more matte than the coating used by Schoonhoven.

Three coats were applied, with drying time in between, to obscure the colour and tone of the newsprint. Blind cleavages were noticed at the base of larger shape areas, possibly due to reactivation of the methylcellulose adhesive combined with the hygroscopic painted surface of the underlying wooden panels.

![Figure 12: After two coats of gesso, the newsprint was still visible](image)

A third coat of untinted 'gesso' was applied to unify the three panels. The final coats of white acrylic Hema® house paint, diluted with tap 50 % tap water, were applied by Beerkens at a later date. This achieved the semi translucent brushstrokes visible on the Schoonhoven pieces. Interestingly, when dry, the replicas were identical in weight to the originals. A board was kept with samples of all materials used, as seen in Figure 13.
Discussion

After completing the replicas to the newspaper coating stage, a documentary film: Jan Schoonhoven – Beamte 18977, Memphis Film and Television, 2005, was viewed. The film revealed several interesting aspects to Schoonhoven's production, which confirmed that the approach taken in replicating was close, but not accurate.
The screenshot from the de Jesus 2005 documentary film (Figure 14) provides a glimpse into the relief construction, showing Schoonhoven’s hands using scissors to make the short pieces of gummed brown paper sit at right angles on the joins. The markings guide placement of short cardboard inserts, but interestingly the gummed paper is not as neat and consistently placed as thought, despite everything being ‘calculated and estimated’. Perhaps he simply did what was mechanically required, knowing that the construction would be covered with paper maché and paint.

The original works replicated here were made in 1964, which meant that they were executed entirely by Schoonhoven and not one of his assistants, or friends, whose methods will undoubtedly vary greatly. This is confirmed by the narrative in the de Jesus film, where former assistants and his son recollect the artist’s methods.
Considerations in treating Schoonhoven reliefs

The final white coats of paint on Schoonhoven’s works may or may not have been applied by the artist. He had these top coats for purposes of a clean white presentation, allowing light to play upon the works, casting shadows and creating illusory depths. Continuing this process using acrylic dispersion coatings, rather than surface cleaning, would not be ethical, or acceptable. Even if the artist did wish for this to occur, one can imagine over time that the layers would become so thick as to obscure the original intent, which relied upon the play of light on the architecturally derived reliefs. The concept of original would potentially be compromised, much like the periodic repainting of gothic sculptures.

But how clean is clean? Does the patina of age help position the works as authentic to their era of production? If patina is important, does this include flyspecks and nicotine accretions? How can these be removed without returning to the stark white of newness? How is an appropriate level of patina assessed?

These questions are partially answered by the market. When questioned about patina in relation to a work held at Borzo Modern and Contemporary Art in Amsterdam (refer to Figure 15), a commercial gallery representing Schoonhoven and other Nul artists, the custodian indicated that the works should not be cleaned to their ‘original’ state, and that the greyish appearance was a desirable patina (pers. Corr 30.05.2014). By referencing this, and other works in institutional collections, a baseline for acceptable levels of dirt and staining may be achieved. I viewed at least twelve works by the artist over the following weeks, and this idea was confirmed by noticing varying levels of dirt, and acknowledging different expectations.
Additionally, it must be remembered that due to the high value of these works, they will generally be kept in pristine conditions, where a light soft brush can be used to regularly remove dust, and that air pollution, cigarette smoke, handling without gloves and insect activity is unlikely to cause further discolouration.

The importance of metadata

The metadata surrounding an artwork can significantly aide treatment and care decisions by providing valuable information on context, current, past and future use, precious storage and display conditions, significance and so on.

Through the process of investigating an artist and specific works, the importance of recording artist intent, motivations, materials and techniques becomes plainly obvious. To avoid second guessing, assumptions, indecision or bending to potentially unethical custodial requests, the artist interview can provide information invaluable to decision making processes. Artist interviews, while time consuming and usually reserved for artists whose work is of exceptionally high monetary value, could become an indispensable tool in the digital era for conservation, curatorial and historical purposes. This of course will require resources, maintenance and appropriate dissemination, however if it becomes part of an accession process for major collecting institutions as part of policy, perhaps in future conservators will be able to assist more proactively in the accurate presentation of contemporary artworks.

Conclusion

The process of interrogating a work by means of replicating reinforced the importance of continual reassessment of approaches and the flexibility of decision making required for treatment of uniquely fabricated works. Basing treatment proposals on one set of criteria alone can potentially result in inappropriate decisions. Allowances for discoveries, updated information, changes in custodial requirements and expectations within practical timeframes are all considerations, which can benefit a positive treatment outcome. Manufacturing replicas can also provide an invaluable tool for developing strategies for the immediate and long term care of artefacts by enabling testing, or even as exhibition copies where the original is too fragile or sensitive for long term display.
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