

If it were to give you an update on the history of the future of printmaking!

By Michael Schneider

There is no way to deny that I am a “science aficionado”. In fact for many years I have been contemplating a SF novel that I intend to write. Surprisingly art has never been part of my considerations for the setting in which the story would be told. A reason for this lies in the fact that I contemplate this novel as way to free my mind from thoughts that are related to every day problems. To think about art in the future would in this case remind me of all the recent and pressing problems that I have to contend with right now and would not help me much to relax and find refuge in an imagined world. For the occasion of this text and the chance to contribute to a larger discourse about the future of printed art I will divert from my routine and make an honest attempt to describe the situation of printmaking in 20 years. Imagine that you have travelled through time and that I have the chance to inform you in brief about what has happened in the meantime and what is going on right now.

What had been called printmaking for centuries is now generally thought of as published art. The theory was discussed for a while but became accepted only after the art market understood its potential. The idea was clear and convincing. To ensure that a work of art is valued it has to be made known. This is a task that can be fulfilled when information about the art work is published, when reproductions are published or even after reactions to it have been published. In the best case, the art work itself is published.

From the time of the invention of the woodblock print the printmaking universe became, over the centuries, the very base of our culture and communication. The idea of being able to publish art and free it from the exclusiveness and control that it was subjected to before, created a revolution that remained unnoticed for a very long time. The potential to free this communicative process from the necessity of gathering around one object at the same time, and the empowerment of the artist to be in control of the production process of multiple images, was very liberating.

Two things changed the way we look at printmaking today. First, the widespread adaptation of marketing strategies in the world art market led to the desperate need for a new and unifying theory. You will no doubt remember the first successful attempts of brand building and merchandising. The very object that constituted the art work became almost obsolete. It was the fact that, once enough information and images were published in media old and new, and these images found their way into the private networks where they became objects of identification and started to stick in the minds of the people, it was possible to sell almost everything that bore the name of the art brand. It worked just like the business of Adidas, Converse, Apple and Meese worked twenty years ago. The second factor was the rise of visual communication to the leading position in global cultural development. In this situation it was printmakers who understood that the very concept of printmaking, the creation of art to be published, was able to explain what was going on in the world of art. It was realised that even art merchandise produced in Mongolia and Siberia, would be of almost no value unless the brand it carried started to make sense again. Paintings were not done anymore to create an image on its own and for its own reasons. Paintings were done to be reproduced in the art e-zines, the networks, and through the *individuanels*, those individually arranged network interfaces that today make you believe you are once more in control of the flow of information. Performances were no longer performed for an audience that was present to live through the experience. In fact the practice of having a live audience is very rare today, except for the data that can be published.

Thanks to the new 3D printers and the cheap polymers that are available today, sculptures are a very popular download. You can print them in any size you like and because of the possibility of

recycling the polymer material you do not waste too much of your resources if you decide to change your mind and your collection. Printmaking was the explanation of why all the printouts are valuable art works, because the value was not created by the fact that the object was materialized, but by the fact that it was published.

Of course this did create a fundamental change in the art market itself and the crisis of the market coincided with the collapse of the financial networks. That was when the only money you could still trust to be in existence was the old-fashioned paper money. At least this would not just disappear within an overstretched networking system of generating value out of nothing, in order to back virtual credits. Even though it seemed to be a disaster at first, it turned out to be the best that could happen to printmakers and their credibility.

The merchandising of art now works on different levels. The most expensive and rare objects are the art works that actually involved the artist in their production. These things are the collectors' items and are usually those that are on display in exhibitions of the big flagship museums. They are as horribly expensive as you can imagine. Today, if you get an authorized print, done under supervision of the artist, signed and certified, you have got your hands on what is closest to that which was considered for a long time to be an authentic piece of art. If you get a certified download, you can at least be sure that the data is not corrupted. If you are not willing to spend money on the art work, you can just use the data that is floating on the net to produce something to display. In fact you can find very interesting things there. Since the Creative Commons License has become standard, so many people, especially the young, are publishing their work, joining the ever growing number of printmakers. When they are successful they can start to market their brand and be recognized and therefore start earning money.

The increase in the percentage of illiterates all over the globe, as images finally became more important in our communicative structures than written information, was extremely unfortunate. This was especially tragic as the educational systems had nowhere adjusted for this, nor had they gained the ability to teach critical skills on how to communicate using images, or to understand how the manipulative power of images can be controlled. Many civil groups today work hard to further empower people and make sure that the number of illiterates and visual illiterates alike go down, but it will be a long time until we fully adjust to and understand this new situation.

Sorry that I have to leave you here. There is much more to tell and explain, but I have to finish an edition of woodblock prints. Since the first proof was digitized and published it became a very popular download, and made it into several most popular lists. It was even presented within the Published Graphics Network as pick of the week, sparking a lot of visual comments. Now is the perfect time to offer the real thing to collectors and auction some of the certified data packs online. I should not miss this window of opportunity as my marketing adviser has reminded me; especially as the investment in that hand-made paper was a huge commitment.

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