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A Modern Graphic Sensibility

I am from a generation whose sense of the world is very transient and without predictable form. As a fine art printmaker, in common with other practitioners I feel a sense of powerless in my chosen direction when faced with the influences from a fairground of techniques and technologies. Instead of the rigour and simplicity of expression that I search for, there is whirlwind of technical change and a bombardment of different forms of electronic imaging, which can make the application of thin layers of ink on paper seem terminally dull.

Some commentators regard printmaking to have reached maturity, in the sense that it has such a diversity of practice and has witnessed such a fast rate of change that the point has now been reached where digital means will come to dominate, and future print processes will bring the potential of printmaking to almost any surface, material and shape. The chemistry of print is also changing, changing the nature of an activity once dominated by potential poisons into a practice that is more environmentally friendly. Such developments can never replace the directness of many traditional print forms but may combine with them to effect further changes. Whatever the process, whatever the means, images will be transferred, cut, and impressed from one surface to another, but in the end it is the qualities and ideas within the print that will demonstrate the print as art.

Technological progress will always drive the practice of printmaking, but technology on its own is not the historical engine of change. Often in modern history, the grounds for progression already existed, but their application unseen because both the conceptual and philosophical ideas had yet to create the atmosphere for change. Only with a change of cultural perception and the release of new ideas can technology yield new approaches. Printmaking is now at the edge of change, a structural movement amidst apparent chaos and new ideologies.
Printmaking must be of its time, but we must not be mistaken in believing that it is purely formal changes that drive the new attitude - it must also be a result of historical/social changes in the philosophical attitude of the arts, and therefore of printers. We are dealing with an epistemological problem when talking of contemporary printmaking practice, an extended practice that could be described as a modern graphic sensibility.

Print is often judged in the action rather than in the conclusion. Printers in the fine art world have become servants of low expectations; at worst, printmaking has become a poor version of social work for the unlucky, the proudly amateur and the frankly untalented. Print as it is projected rarely shows its inattentive, radical and experimental face. Yet with all the histories of print boring the rotten flesh of needless repetition, polished surfaces and the fetishism of materials, there are occasional glimpses of a wider aim and an awareness of our times. There are great practitioners coming from both traditional and radical positions, but too often there is no relevance to the contemporary, no recognition of modern practice or even a desire to progress. There are, however, other possible models, which reflect printmaking history with its need to communicate ideas, to debate, and to reach a mass audience, in contrast to the general practice which has become nothing more than a skilful hobby devoid of content, intent, desire, creativity or imagination.

British printmaking workshops are the altars of repetitive, moribund practice - but there is another possible approach to practical work. This is not the destruction of tradition and its craft practice but an extension of print's definition. Hence we must ask what we mean by print, define the new limits and examine the practice of graphic artists as it exists now.

The context of new technologies is easily characterized - the rise of digital print, computer processing, the Internet, video/photographic improvements, new materials, etc. Our practice is often limited in real terms by our ignorance or limited financial resources. But even at this level the true debate starts to bubble through, as the set of graphic means integrates and fuses. The traditional view starts to look isolated and remote in its 'collector's insistence' on archival values rather than on contemporary forms of expression.
For the first time in history printmaking has dematerialised from materials, manual skills and lifelong experience. Through the computer, a work can reside in memory, it can be transported across the earth to be printed in a distant country, can be printed in different forms. Work in digital form lives in a state of possible change, is open to constant revision. This is only one phase of a historical process which has been redefining the cultural definition of printmaking, through the photomechanical, experiments with multiple images, and the influence of painting displacing prints from the frame to the canvas or to the environmental installation. Printmaking has an air of transformation and the expectation of a new future. Yet dead, traditional skills reign in most institutions of instruction across the world; a beautiful but irrelevant craft persists, and with it a conservative ambition.

The forces of change in fine art printmaking practice are both technical and cultural. For example, the introduction of photomechanical means, particularly in silkscreen and etching, drove the inclusion of materials sourced from the media of television, newspapers and photojournalism. Not only did recent historical events easily transfer into the narrative of the work (sometimes in an iconoclastic way) but also photographic imagery of events in distant parts of the earth and beyond. Thus, the world could parade through an artist's work, as support or as primary subject matter. A different sense of time and reality found expression in the work of artist printmakers, who could make direct reference to the world of events, in almost real time. No longer was the artist in the position of someone reflecting on events, but could be a commentator and participant in the general atmosphere of the moment. Time becomes a series of edits from the most recent image or report, either continuing a narrative or provoking a response. The speed of communication of this media imagery is almost matched by the speed of consumption.

Changes in materials and the growth of different applications for print have also been driving forces of change. Industrial processes seem to have shorter turn-around times, and changing chemistry produces more environmentally friendly materials. There has been an explosion of printed imagery in different forms in every western shopping centre and as the new 'street jewellery' across the poorer nations. Where images were once painted by skilled craftspeople, now the imagery is screened in sections to produce photo-litho colour separations from photographic originals. The rate of change of signs advertising goods and services is so rapid
that we barely notice the parade of changing images - cars, women's bodies, faces, tins, cats, landscapes, etc. New methods of printing onto rounded surfaces or pre-formed surfaces used in packaging have enabled printed images to become the glossy coating for all commodified goods, from rigid foils glued into containers to loose, thin or transparent wrappers. Within our printed fabrics, we carry numerous bank cards, shop cards, telephone cards and identity cards, all of them covered in printed imagery, as are our mobile phones, bags, paper money, cheque books and the other everyday objects we all carry, right down to the exposed designer labels. Printed images can be seen on the surfaces of cars, lorries, buses, buildings and other parts of the built environment. The creation of odd conjunctions of imagery and environments has become common in the Western world, and increasingly so in poorer parts of the world: a symbol system of icons, regularly changing lest our tastes or desires fade with familiarity.

Anyone living in an urban, Western society is saturated with printed imagery, text and other printed surfaces wherever he or she walks or sits. Yet the majority of fine art prints remain bounded by the rectangular format inherited from the Renaissance, and by a set of pristine margins inherited from the bookplates of early print history. Surely the world is now a different place, and the practice we are involved in could be as broad or broader than the commercial applications of printmaking.

The computer opens up any activity to a broad range of users and practitioners. No longer do we have to face grim-faced supervisors in a print room, those white-coated keepers of the secret craft, if we wish to produce a high-quality printed image. The computer has democratised access to complex processes normally requiring deep skill. It is affordable, does not require the employment of experts or the use of expensive presses or materials. Though the quality may not yet be of publishing house standard, it is high enough for most requirements, hence removing barriers of gender, economy and disability. Any set of individuals or interest group can produce a good, finished, printed work in any required form; the computer opens the field to new voices, concerns, political positions and viewpoints. We can see that the nature of the practice will evolve to become a communicative medium in a truly mass-cultural sense. Of course, this must throw
into question many of the certainties and conventions concerning the nature of print practice and its form/structure or purpose.

Printmaking, particularly in England, is populated by female and ethnic groups, whose interests are changing practice. No longer does the activity require physical strength; no longer is it the preserve of machine-obsessed white males. There is clear, rigorous action by issue-based printmakers from perspectives once excluded. The shape of the new social and political concerns is best demonstrated in the practice of female and ethnic artists. This constituency is becoming the best resource of creative power and invention in contemporary printmaking in England.

The computer itself hides a complex of differing demands and functions, together with a conceptual element not previously experienced in a man-made machine. Rapid processing and linkages with computer controlled devices enable the machine, through a broad range of software, to import materials and sources from wider contexts (increasingly, via the Internet) than would have been possible for any one individual at any previous time in history. Even on the pragmatic level the possibilities for image manipulation are difficult to master, because of continual change through innovation and the expansion of choice.

To return to a more general position, printmaking as a creative visual practice appears to have become weightless. By this, I mean that the traditional measures of quality/construction of a print appear to be subject to constant change and questioning. This is not to say that a printer would not use traditional means, nor that drawing could not still provide the underlying structure of a print, but that the definition and inclusion of new practices will throw any approach into question, as to its relation to the contemporary world and to the wider context of visual art practice. Printmaking cannot afford to claim to be a special case, somehow protected from the rigours of theory or the modern world. As a fine art practice, printmaking must take on the modern context and live with a state of doubt that tests or questions every action. Where once, as printers, we would claim skill, process and material as sufficient reasons for the practice, we now find ourselves in a new period of structural change, and ideology comes to the fore. Printmaking has its greatest power when it breaks from the expectations of collectors, acts
surprisingly, does things 'on the wrong side of the street', displays itself in its crudest forms and spits right in the eye of every academic and gallery owner.

All artists die once restricted to rules. Convention, becoming lifeless, no longer speaks to the present, the future or even the past. For printmaking to remain part of contemporary fine art, artist-printers must embrace and progress their practice - not destroy presses and traditional means, but extend, enrich and develop both new and old approaches, be prepared to engage with different means of presentation, new forms and digital structures and, most importantly of all, remember that there is a purpose, a concept, or particular formal approach which gives the practice of printmaking a cultural and contemporary meaning. Merely to practice, only to refer to particular effects or demonstrations of skill, is to reduce the activity to a decorative craft.

So what would be a modern graphic sensibility? What would be the area of activity, and what would be the means? I am cautious of giving definitions, particularly since I see a modern graphic sensibility as being an attitude of mind, an approach. I envision the modern graphic arts practitioner as an individual who is aware of the world he or she comes from and realises that there are voices once censored out of the modernist project. He/she is an individual who realises that social, political and cultural definitions now exist in a state of flux. An individual whose practice is broad, perhaps including film/video, constructed prints, multiples produced to a purpose (rather than market-led repetitions of editions), and other works that transcend media, either digital or traditional. His/her practice would focus not only on gallery spaces, but might invade the everyday environments of shopping malls, public transport or the street billboard. It might exist ironically, on packaging, as false adverts or parallel printed goods, presented in the everyday venues of consumerism. The practice might revise the political/social approach of the narrative print, the picture book or the public billboard. It could be a practice whose products are of little value, that have only a brief history. It would be mischievous, rude, radical, constantly changing form, purpose and content. It would be a practice defined more by the continual mutation of both meaning and structure than by consistency. Its production might be centred on communal workshops or open access centres, or on individual studio activities. Groups and individuals whose voices are rarely heard might find this a positive means to
progress a cultural/social point. Or to become the cynical wit, wryly viewing contemporary issues. Whatever its future forms, practice will be broad beyond our present imaginings, its barriers populated not by the academically trained, but by those seeking a voice in cultural affairs. As the new means become cheaper and more available from different centres of access, the creators will come from different, wider and more inclusive backgrounds than the trained artist. As to quality, already there is a growing change in critical attitudes to new voices from outside, from other parts of society. Measures now used to judge a work may seem hopelessly out of date, in the service of an elite cultural group.

The greatest effect of a modern graphic sensibility will be felt in education, for printmaking will no longer be taught as an exclusive and non-independent activity. Printmaking will need to encompass the new technologies and ideologies; to work within a contemporary critical context and to search out new theoretical viewpoints; to teach a practice which is broad and broadening, whose form is constantly changing, and transforming the context it exists in. The modern graphic sensibility, like the condition of the modern mind, is one of flux and doubt, pressured by the new economics, by technology and social change. The modern graphic sensibility doesn’t just react but could lead to a contemporary visual cultural view.