

## **Printed Conversations and Collaborative Undertakings.**

Paul Laidler

Traditionally when a print studio approaches an artist about producing a print edition, the studio director or master printer would often show the artist a process, material or tool that they may not have encountered before. This technically-led approach can sometimes offer a different, new or novel option for the artist, and is often considered to be the main collaborative contribution of the print editioning studio. The collaborative print studio model has been adopted at The Centre for Fine Print Research (CFPR), part of the University of the West of England, as a method to explore processes and methodologies associated with creative and applied practices in print. As a researcher, printer and publisher at the CFPR the print studio (as research space) is an ideal setting to initiate practice related dialogues that are predicated in print. This approach has been central to my research enquiries and subsequent curatorial considerations when unearthing insights that are unique to the act of making. More specifically, the introduction of digital technologies within this environment helped forge a curatorial premise and selection of artists for the exhibition *Just Press Print*.

The exhibition is an international, travelling group show that includes published prints from the Centre for Fine Print Research that have evolved from collaborations between myself and nine carefully selected artists. Participating artists include Carolyn Bunt, Arthur Buxton, Gordon Cheung, Paul Coldwell, Stanley Donwood, Richard Falle, Sebastian Schramm, Andrew Super and Roy Voss. The exhibition toured over 2016-18 to the following Universities in the USA; Maryland Institute College, Baltimore; Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, Arizona; Dept of Art & Art History, University of Utah; University of Wisconsin-Madison Art Department, School of Education; University of Texas at Austin, and the Museum of Texas Tech University.

The *Just Press Print* exhibition title draws attention to automated associations with digital technology and subsequent assumptions around creative intention within fine art printmaking. These overtones are explored within the exhibition to reveal the inner workings of the collaborative digital print studio. The audience's attention is brought to significant, yet often overlooked elements of the printing process thereby focusing on the evidence of the creative act rather than the often emphasised resulting outcome. The exhibition is primarily concerned with the nature of practice and draws upon practice-led research methods to reveal the applied nature of the artists' decision-making process. The exhibition dispenses with conventional formats, instead displaying sketches, correspondence, and draft editions to highlight the importance of the relationship between artist and master printer and the iterations that work towards the final print.

The approach also has the potential to enrich the reading of an idea in print, that may otherwise not be present in the resulting artefact alone. From a disciplinary perspective it is also worth noting that printmaking is a practice that readily reveals its process and is not afraid to expose the stages of creation, or for that matter, embrace its mistakes.

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In keeping with this openness, I decided to invite artists who have produced prints, although they may not necessarily identify as printmakers. Instead, I selected artists working within the field of graphic arts who had previously encountered digital technology within their practice. The decision to do this was not to stereotype or preclude printmakers but rather to bring another voice to the discipline. The following four case studies provide some insights into studio conversations and how the production process led to further awareness of the artists' relationships with digital technology in their practice.

### **Stanley Donwood**

In 2012, I began discussing the possibility of producing a print edition with the artist Stanley Donwood. Donwood is a multidisciplinary artist best known for his work with the British alternative rock band Radiohead. The artist has created album cover artwork for the group since their inception in 1985 and was an early adopter of digital production methods when designing artwork. In 2011 Donwood had completed the cover artwork for the eighth Radiohead album, *The King of Limbs*. The project also formed part of a much larger body of drawn work inspired by holloways (hidden country footpaths) and other arboreal scenes; images that would later feature in the bestselling book *Holloways*, made in collaboration with Robert Macfarlane and Dan Richards (Faber & Faber, 2013).

Donwood's ability to successfully shift between digital and traditional graphic languages was a key reason for wanting to approach him. The busy schedule of the artist meant that a brand new project would be completely out of the question at this point in time. To be pragmatic I proposed a digitally-mediated edition that would revisit a selection of the arboreal drawings anew. Early conversations revealed that Donwood had become apathetic to the digital processes and subsequently reluctant to revisit the drawings through digitally-mediated means. The artist explained that he was keen to continue his interest with primitive subject matter, working with materials and processes that suited a more organic outcome. Not to be deterred, (and whilst still considering the artist's organic reference) I proposed that we continue a conversation around digital disillusionment. The sympathetic approach is often central to establishing a collaborative relationship and whilst acting as an enabler of digital production the critical voice is essential to demystifying the promise of digital tools. This mindful perspective formed one of many dialogues and is perhaps best captured by Donwood:

Each generation is seduced to an extent by the technology of its own time; if our civilisation doesn't collapse in the near future there will presumably come a time when 3D printing is perceived as quaint and old-timey. I think that when what we see as 'technology' first began to develop at a rapid pace, during the Industrial Revolution, people saw a dizzying parade of developments in almost every field. Suddenly there were machines for everything; from sewing to locomotion, and I suppose that something of that almost magical essence remains present in the cast iron of printing presses, steam engines and so on.

There's a sense in which that level of technology is ageless; if something breaks, any semi-competent engineer can figure out what's gone wrong and then fix it. If we are no longer able to generate sufficient electricity it won't matter, as these

machines were never designed with electricity in mind. There are no silicon chips. There's also the problem of mathematics and the binary nature of digital technology. Digits are what we have attempted to replace everything with, but the things, objects, and aesthetics we are demanding were never digital to begin with, and something unnameable in the human spirit is well aware of this. People instinctively prefer the human-generated curves of a classic car; the sweep of the arm is more beautiful than a digitally created vector. I could go on and on, but I have now put on my t-shirt that says 'DON'T GET ME STARTED'.

The exchanges proved to be extremely enlightening and helped forge a relationship that would later result in the publishing of a digitally-mediated print series. The edition covered some if not all of the artist's previous concerns, and helped select a production process to begin bridging conversations around the digital and physical divide. The possibility of creating a laser-engraved edition where the binary fused with the organic was the catalyst to initiating the edition.

The engraved editions were developed from two separate pencil and ink drawings. In this instance I was supplied with high resolution scans of the drawings, that were then digitally adjusted to translate the drawn marks and tonal qualities through the laser engraving process. As part of the proofing procedure, the digital files were burnt into a number of different paper substrates. The surface qualities associated with the original drawn image had now receded through the paper, presenting a tactile depth that created a topography for the original drawing. The first indications that the engraved images had surpassed a mere technical translation became apparent when omitting light through engraved image. Donwood commented that the vapourised images look very organic and quite mesmerising, adding that it appeared as 'if trained paper-eating bacteria had been told to make a picture'.

### **Richard Falle**

In contrast to Donwood, Richard Falle's work embraces the procedural characteristics and confines of digital software. Falle's approach to image making utilises the collective simplicity of drawn lines within a vector based programme. Each line is developed incrementally through a series of connecting points to create what may be best described as a 'constructed drawing'. The drawing software provides a limited set of tools to create defined, two-dimensional areas or shapes. Images are created by layering those shapes one on top of each other, then adjusting the way they interact with the shapes, or groups of shapes, above or below them. The artist's process reveals a somewhat masochistic passion for generating intricate drawings whilst the printed image belies the painstaking construction method.

Needless to say, Falle's elaborate and concealed methods instantly resonated with the premise of the *Just Press Print* project. Upon accepting my invitation, the ensuing studio dialogue revealed that his process has less to do with intuition, as one might experience with a pencil or paintbrush. Instead the artist adopts a more considered methodology; approaching every surface as a problem to be solved through experimentation using trial and error. Falle explained that the possibility to continually change the drawing is more gratifying than using a more sympathetic or expressive medium.

The completed digital drawing file often documents the entire creative process, and will contain many hidden variations of the final image, development ideas and sketches embedded within it, but not visible. This form then captures the work of art from inception to completion in a way that the artist finds unique. Falle's procedures and relationship to the tradition of drawing offers a number of avenues about how digital construction methods maybe extending autographic distinctions and process-led concerns with representational forms in a digital age.

### **Carolyn Bunt**

Concealment of image construction is also a device used within the photographic works of Carolyn Bunt. The artist's images depict isolated petrol stations that harbour a slickness associated with minimalist design reminiscent of dystopian cinematic vistas. The validity of the image is brought into question by a visual acuity that is symptomatic of a digital age and the ability to identify digital interventions within representational forms. For example, aesthetic associations with seamless surfaces and spatial ambiguity are now part of a contemporary visual vocabulary. These aesthetic cues combined with Bunt's ability to select a place and capture a scene (for its potential within a digital environment) were the key factors for inviting the artist to produce a printed edition.

During the collaborative production Bunt's foresight for this type of projective thinking was also consistent when considering the physicality of the digital image. Ostensibly the substrate is judged to be more than a surface that simply receives the image. It may come as no surprise that the artist is also a graphic designer – exercising a designerly intent reminiscent of the modernist principle, form and function. Bunt described that the depositing of ink onto a specific paper should be sympathetic to the atmosphere in the constructed image, a language harking back to mechanical printmaking whilst fully engaged with the subtleties of digital image making.

### **Gordon Cheung**

The preoccupation with a technological informed scene provided part of the criteria when selecting possible artists to approach and work with. As stated, I was interested in locating individuals who did not necessarily identify as printmakers but exhibited practice that operated within the graphic arts field. Searches often included viewing websites, reading publications and visiting exhibitions. In 2013, I came across the website of artist Gordon Cheung who described his practice as bridging virtual and actual realities to create epic techno-sublime vistas.

Born in 1975, Cheung studied painting at Central St Martins College of Art and later at the Royal College of Art, London from where he graduated in 2001. Working in his London studio Cheung combines painting and assemblage techniques on large scale canvases that address themes of global crises and the spread of capitalism. After meeting with Cheung on two separate occasions we decided to develop a 3D printed edition. The project would be a remote collaboration, coinciding with a residency that the artist was undertaking in Amsterdam, and would extend the body of work to sculptural outcomes.

The project drew upon the historical reflection of contemporary culture through the exploration of the Dutch Golden Age, a period of extraordinary wealth and power in 16th and 17th century Holland. The title of the edition *Tulipmania*, referenced a notorious episode in 17th-century Dutch history, in which the trading of tulip bulbs became so extreme that the price of one flower would sell for ten times the annual wage of a skilled worker. 'Tulipmania' was the world's first recorded major financial crash, an occurrence that the artist has drawn upon for this work, highlighting that economic bubbles are not just a modern-day phenomenon.

In 2013, I received a tulip bulb in the post that was scanned to record the three-dimensional surface of bulb. The captured data was then used to create five separate files as part of a devolutionary print series. The five devolutionary stages of the bulb begin with the original high-resolution 3D recording (constructed of 381,774 triangles) towards the simplification or decimation of the object as a pyramid structure. The lowering of resolution in each 3D file eventually begins to reveal the triangular structures that are formed to create the final object - an image-construction process similar to a digital photograph and the building of visual information through pixels.

Before the printing process begins the 3D files are set to a specific number of triangles that are then 'cleaned' (by adding or subtracting triangles in a 3D software programme) to make sure that the model is 'watertight' for the printing process. The model is 3D printed in wax then dipped into a ceramic slip - an ancient process known as lost wax casting. The ceramic coated bulb is then baked in an oven that melts the wax whilst hardening the ceramic exterior, creating a shell that is then filled with molten brass. The brass is then plated to have an 18-carat goldish hue.

Cheung's practice, and many others of his generation, is perhaps best captured by the design group Troika. In the publication *Digital by Design, Crafting Technology for Products and Environments* the group have identified the emergence of a unique generational category of artists. described as individuals 'who have grown up amid the digital revolution and are subsequently inspired by the new media of our age'. The group speculates that science fiction films pertaining to possible futures have helped forge a common imagination, as well as sparking a willingness to think and create in technological terms<sup>1</sup>. More importantly, this generation has witnessed the transition between analogue and digital, enabling an experiential understanding of materiality and visual languages associated with both pre- and post- digital periods.

In-keeping with Gordon Cheung's practice, the *Just Press Print* project can be said to look to the future, whilst remaining firmly rooted in the past. The exhibition brings to light discussions on the evolving nature of digital technology and its potential influence upon established definitions and practices within the discipline of printmaking.

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<sup>1</sup> *Digital by Design, Crafting Technology for Products and Environments*, Thames and Hudson, 2008, p.11