

Printmaking Today article 2018

Mapping Post-digital Practice in the Graphic Arts.

It has been suggested by a range of established commentators that digital technology may have potentially created a 'mental change' within the creative process of making images and objects. Although this statement is somewhat broad and our ability to understand change often requires a certain amount of time to have passed (before the significance of an event may be better understood) and the compulsion to begin considering these ruminations has developed into a curatorial project. The initial curatorial inquiry entitled *Looking Through the Eyes of Machines as Humans* was presented at the *Post-digital printmaking. Redefinition of print* Conference, Wrocław, Poland in Dec 2017.

Within a Post-digital period, digital technologies are accepted as commonplace and the question as to whether something is analogue or digital appears to have receded. The receding from one experience into another suggests a phase of transition and a generational context for those of us born before the digital age. The initiation of the *Looking Through the Eyes of Machines as Humans* project is at root an experiential response that seeks to present those born after the digital age - who may not identify with a shift from one technology to another. The curatorial premise also includes emerging practitioners who seamlessly shifts between analogue and digital with a view to begin mapping a Post-digital response to making within the graphic arts.

To begin capturing both emerging and generational Post-digital practices a selection of students were invited to make an edition of six prints in response to the curatorial title. The selection procedure took into account the students previous work that explored both digitally mediated production methods and themes that are symptomatic of a digital age. Similarly, the ubiquitous nature of digital technology across all art and design disciplines today warranted a broader survey of practices and institutions. These included BA Graphic Design, BA Illustration and MA Printmaking students from the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK; BA Printmaking at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, USA and Fine Art at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. The decision to invite students who engage with Graphic Arts practices as opposed to just Printmakers was inspired by the curatorial premise behind the 2010 Philagrafika Art Festival *The Graphic Unconscious*. The festival curators conceived a theoretical framework that would broaden traditional definitions and assertions about the practice of printmaking and its cohorts. By invoking the term 'imprint' and revisiting the matrix, medium and support anew associations with print characteristics such as multiplicity and seriality could be extended to artists who may not locate their practice with printmaking. The resulting outlook becomes more democratic, open to a wider range of practitioners and approaches. In the context of this project the role of digital mediation in the conception or production of physical artefacts provided the framework.

Topics cover a number of themes that discuss the coding of tacit knowledge, connectivity and human disconnection and disembodied experiences to name but a few. The following three students expand upon these technologically informed ideas.

UWE Graphic Design student Jamie Burns decided to bring our attention to the subtle encroachment of digital surveillance into our every day lives. Burn's considered how our personal details are being infiltrated through online tactics alongside an ensuing anxiety epidemic of being watched. The stencilled IP address on window blinds presents the merging of digital technology into our physical environment where our digital objects are supplying us with a second address.

UWE Illustration student Olivia Beckett speculates on the reductive nature of digital technology and the subsequent augmentation of derivative objects and spaces. Beckett posed the question of how far can we simplify until the physical ends up disappearing altogether? Will we need studio spaces in

the future? Beckett applied this thinking to her own studio space using multi-perspective photography to create an amalgamation of forms into a single design. The final 3D rendering in plasticine refers to the plasticity of digital tools and the mutable nature of digital technology. Fine Art student Estela Barceló Molina from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid combined photoengraving and digital print to comment upon memory and the loss of information that is inherent within all visualization technologies. Interestingly the deterioration of both mechanical and digital matrixes are achieved through labour intensive production methods. The former is attributed to the continuous physical passing of a plate through the press whilst the latter is achieved by using a lossy compression file format such as a Jpeg. The digital file format uses inexact data encoding and decoding, making an image susceptible to the lose of information when continuously opening and closing the file. To create a corresponding digital image aberration Estela manually repeated the keyboard commands of open, save, close some six hundred times. The series entitled *Prememoria* provides an insight into an age of digital automation where the inclusion of manual labour aligns with a critical making movement and imperfection is one of many emerging #tags toward the humanization of digital technologies?

Looking Through the Eyes of Machines as Humans is still in its infancy although the commentary thus far undoubtedly has a dystopian outlook, perhaps a disposition best captured by the satirist, writer and broadcaster Charlie Brooker who posited 'if digital technology is a drug, and it does feel like a drug, then what precisely, are the side effects?