

Authentic Experience: Multiplicity and Dislocation in Printmaking and Contemporary Culture

Presented at the 2009 IMPACT Conference by Kevin Haas

Introduction

A quintessential conundrum of contemporary life is a quest for authentic experience within a sea of mass production. The print exists between the ubiquity of this production and our attempts to recover our own individuality in the midst of this. In light of the immeasurable quantity of goods produced throughout the world, I have wondered if artists' prints and multiples can counteract other means of uniform production, or if they belie a fantasy for production on this scale?

The project of printing has always been to meet or exceed the need to provide information to a growing mass culture. In contrast, the field of fine art printmaking, although interconnected with the technology of printing, has been primarily focused on craftsmanship and artistic expression. Although there are many different issues that can be explored in depth between these contrasting modes of production, I have chosen to examine the roles of production and consumption in consumer society, in order to position the democratic potential and limits of printmaking with more clarity. Naturally, issues of the handmade and its relation to the mass produced emerge. Questions of authenticity are also interwoven into this debate, and can be reconsidered through the filter of ideas that come from the field of tourism studies. The influence of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is present throughout what I have written even though I do not address it directly. It is still an unavoidable source when discussing the dilemmas and contradictions that I see within printmaking. Even though I am trying to connect ideas that may seem very separate from printmaking, I would suggest that artists working with prints and multiples are positioned to confront these issues and implications, residing somewhere in the middle of this dislocating situation which is our everyday lives.

Production / Consumption

On a scale from the unique to the mass produced, fine art prints fall much closer to the unique object, despite their multiplicity. Do they hold the elite status that the unique art object holds, even though their commercial value may be diminished because they exist as multiples? Or, do they maintain an aura of authenticity while providing the familiarity of being connected to the world of goods around us? Even if prints can be dispersed or owned by many people, seemingly one of the chief reasons for making a print, does this potential seem trivial against the array of tools for mass communication and production? These questions acknowledge the problematic position printmaking holds within art and have led me to examine how prints exist within this spectrum of production and consumption.

The documentary film about the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky titled "Manufactured Landscapes" is an examination of the effects of production and consumption. Burtynsky's stunning photographs instantly attract and repel as they

document the massive impact of industry on our landscapes. The opening shot to the film is a continuous eight and a half minute long pan across the length of a factory in China past the numerous assembly lines and workers. Seeing production on this scale is an astonishing if not sobering sight.

Consumption is the necessary corollary to production, but we should consider how this balance has shifted over the last several centuries. The pre-modern society was production-based, and focused primarily on meeting the basic necessities of small localized groups, families, and individuals. More indulgent or affluent forms of consumption were available only to the elite. With the emergence of industrialization in the modern period, through the middle of the last century, increasingly complex forms of mass consumption became a requisite component of production on a mass scale. During this time, there was a balance between production and consumption, but since the 1980s, consumption has taken precedence, particularly in a symbolic form on a globalized scale. According to Paul Ransome, we have moved “towards a type of society where...there is no longer any necessary relationship between a particular act of production and a particular act of consumption.” (Ransome, 2005) We now require a greater variety of goods to individuate ourselves, making variation and difference essential aspects of production. Consumption is conspicuous and interwoven with leisure.

The diversity and variety of prints created by artists are representative of a range of personal values and ideologies, thus potentially catering to a variety of consumers, but their consumption still remains very localized. Most printmakers never make anything in quantities so vast to be considered mass produced, although they may entertain or flirt with the idea. Prints directly acknowledge their potential for consumption through their very multiplicity. Most fine art printmaking publishing studios will usually produce up to fifty impressions of a print, while individual artists may be satisfied with as little as two or three. Publishing studios may have the resources to sell their prints to a wider audience, but there are still a limited number of people or organizations that are willing spend \$800 to many thousands of dollars on a print. This, along with the cost of time and labor to produce prints, determines that the numbers must be kept low for practical reasons, as well as to maintain demand. As it is with all art, these prints are an unregulated commodity and their ownership acknowledges affluent consumption: the privileged site of autonomy, meaning, subjectivity, privacy, and freedom. (Ransome, 2005)

Some art dealers have found that the Internet, and archival inkjet printers, provide the best way to meet the demand for affordable art. This new form of publishing has proven successful for Web sites such as 20x200, and Artocracy. 20x200, whose tag line is “(limited editions × low prices) + the internet = art for everyone,” releases new original editions weekly. Each edition is typically available in three standard sizes: 8” × 10”, 11” × 14”, and 16” × 20”, and is created in quantities of up to 200, 500, and 20 respectively. The smallest size always sells for \$20. Changing attitudes towards multiplicity, new technologies, and, most significantly, accessible pricing, has made this form of producing editions more attainable than many handmade prints.

Globalized Mass Production / The Handmade

Common to the printmaking community is the exchange portfolio, which sidesteps the usual economic exchange for goods. At the 2009 Southern Graphics Council Conference in Chicago there were fourteen curated exchange portfolios on view, with prints by approximately two hundred and forty artists, myself included. This outpouring of prints attempts to celebrate the egalitarian potential of the print, and cooperative exchange over economic value. However, they are exchanged amongst an exclusive and limited number of people, so this practice could be seen as curtailing and contradicting this potential.

If prints are much like other unique works of art, how do we evaluate their multiplicity in the context of production on a globalized scale? How can the handmade multiple act against the ubiquity of other goods, and why choose a process that allows us to make more of something, when we are already surrounded, and inundated, by uniformity?

Brian Ulrich's series of photos titled 'Copia,' the Latin word for abundance, explore the implications of consumerism. His photograph of the countless checkout aisles receding into the distance at a Target superstore in Indiana is a perfect example of the excess of consumer culture and the incessant demand for goods.

When we bring home that new coffee maker, and open the box, it is as if we are the first human to ever lay hands on this object. It is perfectly wrapped, sealed with carefully positioned pieces of tape, and free of any traces of fingerprints from the person who assembled it. We are led to believe it was born into the world for us and by us. This hygienic and virginal object purposefully disguises the act of its creation and makes the persons involved in its production irrelevant.

This disconnection is the baseline for much of our daily lives, and is perhaps the crux of the continued engagement so many of us have with printmaking. It allows us to participate in the world of production but remain rooted in individual expression and craftsmanship. I would suggest that this is a positive view of how printmaking relates to mass production. If consumerism allows us to align ourselves with different lifestyles and subcultures by defining our personal preferences and desires, making by hand becomes the reverse of this, while still paralleling this compulsion. Throughout the day, most of us use things we have not made, do not understand, and could never fabricate on our own. Artist working within the field of printmaking share traditions, conventions and innovations that provide a sense of connection. With printmaking we are able to reveal something about ourselves and, in the words of Richard Sennett, "imagine larger categories of 'good'," by learning from the physical actions of creation and production. (Sennett, 2008) The activity of making prints reinforces human limits through the idiosyncrasies of the handmade and because of their limited dispersal. It makes up for disconnection by providing the possibility of a positive relationship between production and consumption, and by communicating very specifically and directly, rather than to a mass audience.

The series of etchings by Joseph Lupo, simply titled 'Receipts,' seem to neatly encapsulate the dilemmas we encounter between consumerism, the multiple and the handmade. They replicate receipts he has received for various everyday goods, and are all created at the same size as the 'original.' Although they are faithfully recreated and

etched into the copper plates, the slight shakiness of the line quality, the plate tone, and embossment of the plate on the paper, are the telltale signs of the disparity between making by hand and the tracking of our consumer habits. Artists working with prints may attempt to circumvent the relationship printmaking has with mass production, but it can be difficult to completely disengage from it. The handmade may attempt to counteract the mass produced, but one could argue that the creation of prints still engages in the production of more goods, somehow lessening or negating this quality.

Conrad Bakker's 'Untitled Mail Order Catalog' is just that: a fully functional mail-order catalog of designer objects. The difference is that upon closer inspection, you realize that all the items for sale are actually hand carved and painted objects, and rather crudely so. They are entirely dysfunctional, and even if they were the real things, most of the objects he has chosen to replicate, such as the 'Ultra Slim Radar Detector' or the 'Garage Door Remote Control Key Ring' have limited practical use. However, these are not just art objects for those who can afford them. The price of these little sculptures is determined by the price of their original counterparts: \$295 for the LCD Pocket Television, \$45 for the Digital Tire Gauge. Conventional art world price distinctions are overturned in favor of the fetish for commodities. It is a confrontation where art as commodity competes with all the other endless goods available to us.

The sculpture by Jeff Carter, titled 'Catalog (Blue Tables),' appropriates a blue IKEA side-table—a mass-produced multiple—to address its production and our complicity with this object. By cutting apart and mechanically animating several of the tables, removing them from the world of functional, low-priced furniture with a pleasing designer aesthetic, they are transformed into a tiny square of ocean. Perhaps it is the very ocean these tables traveled across by container ship to reach North America. But this picture wouldn't be complete without some trace of the resources used, and the waste generated to satisfy our nesting needs. There, bobbing on the surface is the ubiquitous plastic water bottle. This sculpture playfully and inventively brings the broader spectrum of production and consumption to the forefront, while recognizing the desires this object represents: excessive consumption and its global reach being components of this.

Tourism / Authentic Experience

Travel and tourism is the largest industry in the world. It seduces individuals with the impression that they have left their everyday experiences behind, and have stepped into something exotic, although this is often never truly the case. Travel and tourism manifest our desires for enriching authentic experiences. Being a tourist also connects us with similar, shared experiences: a world of universal experiences. It is also about consuming goods and services, which are, in a sense, unnecessary. Tourism is a leisure activity that allows us to participate in the 'modern experience' and display the status we have achieved at work and at home. (Urry, 2002)

Upon arrival at a destination we may find that the actual place doesn't quite live up to the reproductions we have seen throughout our lives. Standing beside us are other tourists with cameras who, although strangers, are somehow, at least superficially, eerily like ourselves. Tourism is a way of choosing to define ourselves, just as we chose to buy this item or another, although many others may be making similar purchases. It is perhaps the best example of the dilemma I am attempting to identify; each of us trying

to consume those moments of 'being there' with our digital cameras and cell phones, while we multiply nearly identical images taken by more tourists from across the globe.

It may be somewhat of a stretch to connect tourism with printmaking, but hopefully the broad parallels that can be made provide some more insight into what the authentic might be. The simple fact is that most of us attending this conference are tourists, whether we choose to admit it or not. The tours of galleries, museums, and studios, and the entertainments provided by the particular destination, all provide an opportunity of 'being there' and hopefully connecting in some meaningful way so that we may eventually share and reproduce these experiences with others. But these experiences can be limited, cursory, and predetermined: the gaze of the tourist. Viewed in this way, the print, despite being handmade, can deprive us of our desire for unique experiences since it is only one of potentially numerous similar images.

The art world sustains a great deal of tourism by providing enticing destinations like new 'starchitect' designed museums, and art fairs, along with the ensuing hotels, restaurants, and nightlife. One characteristic that determines the tourist's experience is that it happens in places that are not directly connected with paid work. (Urry, 2002) But for the artist tourist this can become confused since the destination many of us head to—the museum—is itself, a tourist site. The art world easily blurs the relationships between work, leisure and status.

The screenprints by the collaborative team of Ben Langlands & Nikki Bell titled 'Air Routes of the World,' depict a map of these routes, with a day version and a night version. Their artist book 'Frozen Sky,' continues with the theme of global travel and lists the many cryptic three letter codes for airports throughout the world accompanied by more maps of flight patterns. Despite the connectedness these maps may imply, it is ultimately a system of disconnection and isolation, which is revealed by the fragmented text interspersed through the book — "Transience & Alienation," "Disposability & Discontinuity," and "A Suspended Future."

Authenticity can seem to be an elusive term, and is perhaps diluted of its true meaning when considered in relation to tourism and how we choose to experience the world. Uniqueness becomes difficult to define when everywhere we turn we find more experiences and things carefully marketed to our perceived needs and desires. Finding a distinction between the tourist and the traveler can define how we choose to seek out authenticity. Presumably, it is the traveler who has a deeper, more connected and enriching experience. The traveler could be compared to the craftsman, as opposed to the amateur and tourist, making engagement, concentration, and time, the primary means of encounter.

The mass produced print, such as the picture postcard, idealizes and glamorizes tourist destinations, by replicating and condensing place and experience into an iconic and unattainable universal image. With the fine art print however, the original and the multiple cannot be separated from one another. The print is both the experience and its reproduction: the authentic is forever fragmented and multiplied.

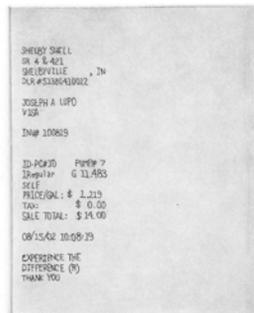
Conclusion

None of these issues are new to printmaking, but when viewed through the lenses of mass production and tourism, our perspective is hopefully changed by examining what surrounds us in the contemporary world. The tourist experience has many layers of false authenticity, and consumerism only provides us with a partial fulfillment of our desires. Locating originality, or the value of reproduction, when we are lost within a profusion of goods and experiences, can be a bewildering, if not futile quest. What does remain constant and undeniable, is a need for systems of communication that provide real engagement and meaningful exchange. Perhaps the dialogue that printmaking sustains manages this in some small way, even while it is part of the dislocation we witness around us.

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Selected Presentation Images



1. Edward Burtynsky. *Manufacturing #10A and 10B, Cankun Factory, Xiamen City*. 2005
2. Brooke Steiger printing Tanja Softic's *Fall & Flow* at Tamarind Institute.
3. Portfolio boxes being prepared for the exchange portfolio *Are We There Yet?*
4. Brian Ulrich. *Copia: Retail: Grainger, IN*. 2003.

5. Joseph Lupo. *08/15/02*. Etching. 4"x3.25". 2002.
6. Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Mail Order Catalog*. 2000.
7. Jeff Carter. *Catalog (Blue Tables)*. 2007.
8. Tandem Press.
9. The Tate Modern.
10. Nikki Bell & Ben Langlands. *Frozen Sky*. 1998.
11. Jason Urban. *Sunset Sticks*. 2009.