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# Violating Protocols

by Johanna Drucker

Put the two words of the title into play. *Violating* can work as an adjective or a verb, suggesting protocols that challenge the status quo, or the challenge to existing rules and parameters. *Protocols* are ways of doing, the step by step performance of actions spelled out in explicit instructions, and they are also models of what something is or can be. Put in relation to print, the phrase asks: what are the models of what print is and does? To answer this, we have to think not only about how these ideas are altered by digital media, but instead, pose the question within a larger frame: How do current conditions for art making change what we think art can do and how? The models of printmaking are best conceived within that larger horizon.

The title of the CommandPrint conference shows the coming of age of digital printmaking. Digital technology is now used as a production tool, a metatechnology, and conceptual platform for printing. Digital tools have become fully integrated means and instruments of production. We no longer question their legitimacy or use. Much discussion revolved, and still does, around the ways the meta-technological capability of digital tools creates an impact on aesthetic practice. Digital tools can mediate among production modes, re-representing and re-mediating the visual information of other formats. The hybridization of production and theory of hybrid media are common and familiar themes. After two decades of critical discussion, these are no longer novel concepts.

But we have not produced as clearly formulated a discussion about the cultural practice of printmaking, and the ways digital media challenge the conception of traditional ideas. In other words, to reiterate what I stated above: *How does digital media cause us to rethink and/or violate the conceptual basis/protocols of print as a cultural practice?*

Putting the question this way shifts the focus of inquiry. Instead of asking, "What do we think about print in an age of digital media?" we can ask, "How does our model of what art is change through printmaking's engagement with digital media?"

The changes we can track occur across the production, conception, distribution, the notion of agency we attribute to print, and the critical discourse it provokes. Let us look at each of these in turn.

## Production

Production: in the artists' books community we have a phrase "available means" by which we intend the same thing that Kerry James Marshall meant when he used the phrase "by any means" in his talk at CommandPrint. No medium or method is inherently better than another and none are essential to the production of interesting work. The challenge is always to make use of the aesthetic properties of a medium. *Materiality matters*. In other words, *the means of production signify*. The means of production have an indexical link to class, labor, and capital. They signify in the cultural sphere. Whether we like it or not, the ability to command capital has become a major gesture of validation in the way fine art functions as a cultural practice. The recent flap over the Damien Hirst sculpture and its high price tag, manipulated market, and strategy of attention-getting show how strong a purchase the signifying value of capital has on the art world.

The production challenge in print is the same as it is in any aesthetic sphere. *How do you make work that can be distinguished from any other product?* The answer to this question does not come from materiality or media. However a work is made, whether it is crafted by hand, fabricated by machine, defined in an ephemeral event-based or conceptual apparatus, a work of art is, to quote artist Brad Freeman, brain-made. The conception values of fine art distinguish it from mere product.

## Conception

Conception values are defined as the parameters according to which we understand what can be shown or expressed, what constitutes an aesthetic expression, and how this can be changed or challenged. Much work in the printmaking mode follows existing conventions and formulae. This is the way printmaking is done, the work proclaims. Every work of art, however conventional or minimal or adventurous, expressed at once a model

of what we think art (and sometimes art in a particular mode or medium) is, and also constitutes such a work. A work of fiction in the novel form is premised on a model of what a novel is—it expresses that model while also being a novel. So it is with prints and printmaking, photos and photography, painting, sculpture, and art works as a special class of objects. Some works of art challenge those terms. They ask that we rethink the model of what we understand a print or other work to be. If we consider the long history of printmaking, and try to enumerate a list of printmakers whose work set new terms for what a work of art should be, the list is not very long: Goya, Blake, Posada, Cheret, and maybe Robbie Conal, R. Crumb, Raymond Pettibone, Alfredo Jaar and Felix Gonzales-Torres. Few printmakers have challenge the terms of art as a conceptual category. A few book artists have used print formats to challenge the conceptual parameters of art-making: Marcel Broodthaers and Dieter Rot come to mind. Seems like time.

What we think a print *is* changes across circumstances and also according to the *use* we conceive print as serving. Because printmaking cuts across many spheres of human activity, many of which engage visual reproduction but are not, striking speaking, conceived exclusively as works of art, it has several traditions of use. A print is not just an object or thing, it is frequently conceived in terms of use. Thus the way we think about what a print is has to be approached from this perspective.

A print can be used for communication. The concept of multiples, whether in an artmaking or a broader frame, is premised on the ability of printing to facilitate the distribution of ideas. In this mode, printmaking is a publishing origin and history with which it is associated.<sup>1</sup> Print was also an instrument for the production of knowledge. From its appearance in the Renaissance, printmaking has served scientific inquiry in western culture, providing a means of stabilizing visual expressions of knowledge. The use of “exactly repeatable statements,” to use William Ivins’s famous phrase, is a turning point in the operation of visual epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

Printmaking as an art form can function as a portal, a frame, or threshold through which or by which to create alternative thought and understanding. William Blake’s commitment to opening the doors of perception embodies the use of print as a way of provoking alternative thought. Print has the ability to rethink and transform understanding.

Finally, printmaking can perform the functions of tactical and strategic media. Whether conceived in the legacy of an avant-garde concept of resistance and negativity, or in a more contemporary frame of activism, prints have the ability to circulate independently and to insinuate themselves into many circumstances. This makes them ideal tactical instruments.

No doubt other terms and frameworks could be added to this list of communication, knowledge production, portal of perception, and tactical instrument. But by enumerating these, we see already the ways the models according to which we conceive of printmaking are linked to various functions and traditions of use.

## Distribution

The ways we conceive of distribution protocols have their own lineages and are also subject to change in relation to new media. Within the traditions of publishing, distribution means are organized to serve the fine arts, democratic access, mass production, and communication functions. We know that art venues have their own status and priorities. Journalistic environments have others. Public postings and hoardings serve other constituencies and purposes. But here, again, we can see that the conception of protocols is enhanced by shifting our model of a print from that of a *thing* to that of a set of operations within *discourse networks*. The example provided by Sandow Birk and Paul Mullooney was vivid in this regard. While creating a very limited edition of a large scale work, they were also able to design a variety of other distribution formats and mechanisms. Thinking in terms of multi-platform methods of distribution makes sense in the current media environment. Using each medium to its best advantage allows each to be maximized: print originals, mass produced publications, online versions.

## Agency

Finally, as in any consideration of works of art, we come to the question of artistic agency and the ways it is conceived. The work is what matters, not whether it is printed or digitally produced and distributed. Printmaking has to be interesting work first, and only then are its properties as print of value or interest. If a work is only interesting as a print, then it will remain within the parameters of existing models, no matter how beautiful, grand, adventurous, or engaging it may be. What, after all, is an artist? And what are the kinds of agency we want works of art and artists to engender and sustain? Many strategies exist for positing work and ideas within the current culture so that they generate symbolic capital. But if these terms are set entirely by celebrity culture, then artist are not inventing or setting these terms, they are merely creating a product line that is branded by their art-celebrity status.

## Critical discourse

As always, the challenge of making interesting work is linked to the equally charged task of creating a vital critical discourse around the work. To restate a claim made above, every work of art, every aesthetic expression, embodies models and protocols, ideas about what matters and how we think about what a work of art is—and how it makes us think, again, about what we

do not already know. Or, alternatively, it allows us to re-think our understanding of experience, phenomena, self, and other, circumstances, culture, and history – through a process of re-familiarization, awakening to connections and associations masked and obscured in the product mode of consumer culture.

Works of art open a space in the cultural imaginary. I think of Dean Doss's artist's book, *Art in the Age of Partial Objects*, as emblematic of the sensibility that engages with the ability of art to provide insight into knowledge as aesthetic experience. That work is premised on the realization that we are always within the experience of knowing, perceiving, and that the situated condition of understanding is intensified and rendered self-conscious through aesthetic work.

In conclusion, then, I come back to the questions with which I began. What are the many and various ways in which the discourse networks of new media transform print and in so doing, transform the possibilities of art as a cultural practice? We can engage the many possibilities of the multi-platform capabilities offered by current media but must also engage in the self-conscious re-conceptualization of the models of what printmaking is and does. The shift that will take place in such a re-conceptualization will be to move from violating protocols to transforming ones.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and the responses it generated.

<sup>2</sup> William Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*, (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1953), also, James Elkins's work on visual forms and scientific or other knowledge representations, *The Domain of Images*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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***She recently participated in the featured panel discussion, *Command Print, March 2008 at the Southern Graphics Council Conference. This paper is a summary of her remarks.****