

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

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HUMOR

plus
PHILAGRAFIKA



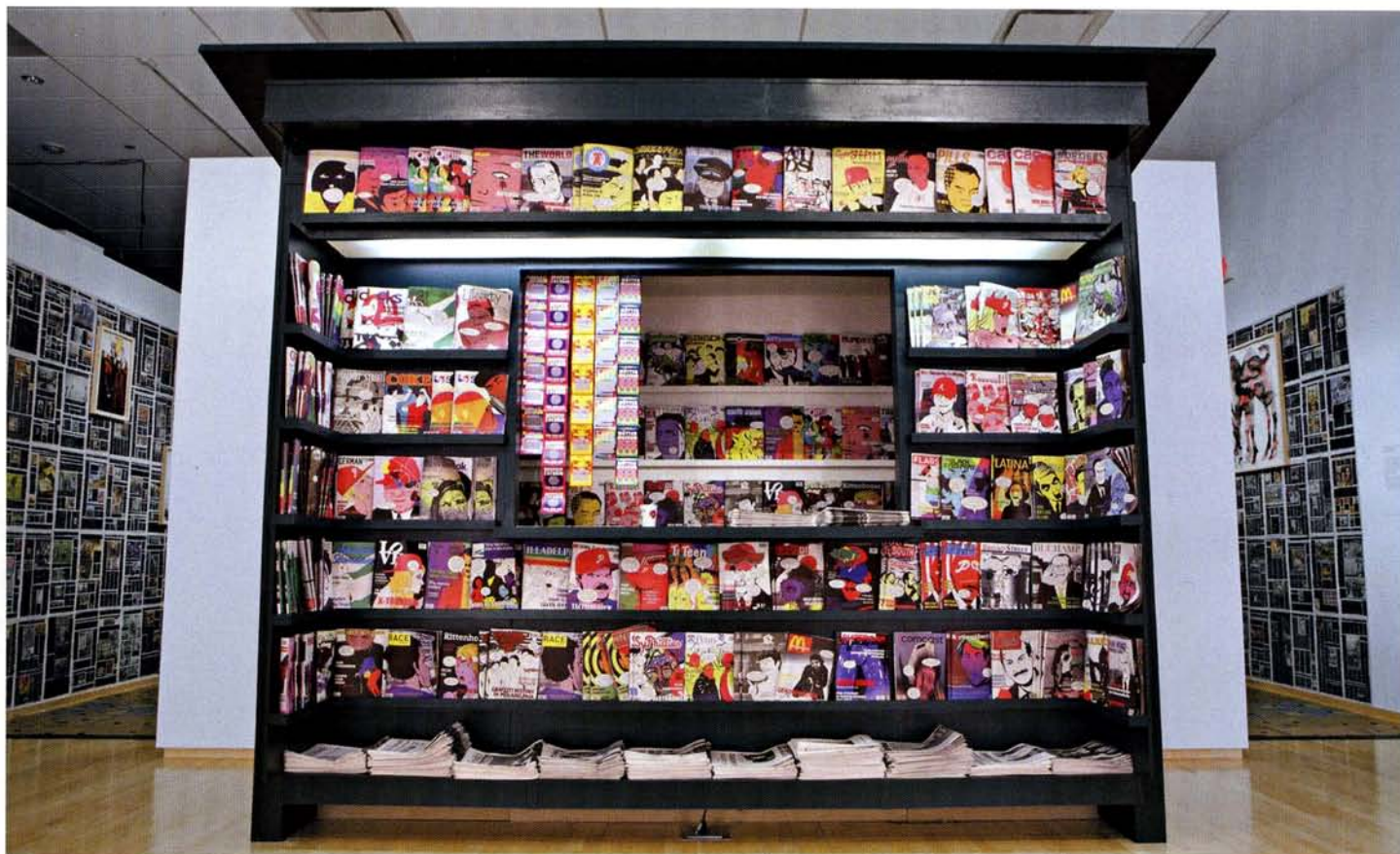
APRIL'10 \$9.00

MULTIPLES

THE OPEN PRINT

Philadelphia hosts a citywide exhibition that invites artists from around the world to push the definition of what constitutes a print.

BY FAYE HIRSCH



WITH THE GOAL of demonstrating the pervasiveness of prints in our lives, Philagrafika 2010, an international exhibition five years in the making, launched citywide in Philadelphia in mid-January. Between then and the festival's closing on Apr. 11, residents and visitors will have experienced, along with a couple of sucker-punch snowstorms, a five-museum group exhibition titled "The Graphic Unconscious," site-specific interventions (under the rubric "Out of Print") at historical venues like the Independence Seaport Museum and the American Philosophical Society Museum, and collateral events and exhibitions (a number of them straying pretty far from the ostensible theme) at 78 additional sites.

The nifty cover to the Philagrafika guidebook is letterpress-printed in a sideways text that reads, "This Project Started in Confusion and Will End in Disarray." (It was designed by one of the participants, Cleveland-born artist Carl Pope.) One guesses that the organizers will have breathed a sigh of relief when that alarming trajectory proves false, as it certainly will. In 2006, inspired by Philly's long involvement with print (going back at least to Benjamin Franklin's press, established in 1730), an ad hoc committee of enthusiasts known as the Philadelphia Print Collective hatched a plan for a recurring citywide show (envisioned as a biennial, though a rotation of three or even four years is now under consideration). Prints, how-

View of Francesc Ruiz's *Newsstand*, 2010, wooden structure, printed magazines and newspaper; at Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Temple University. All venues this article in Philadelphia.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

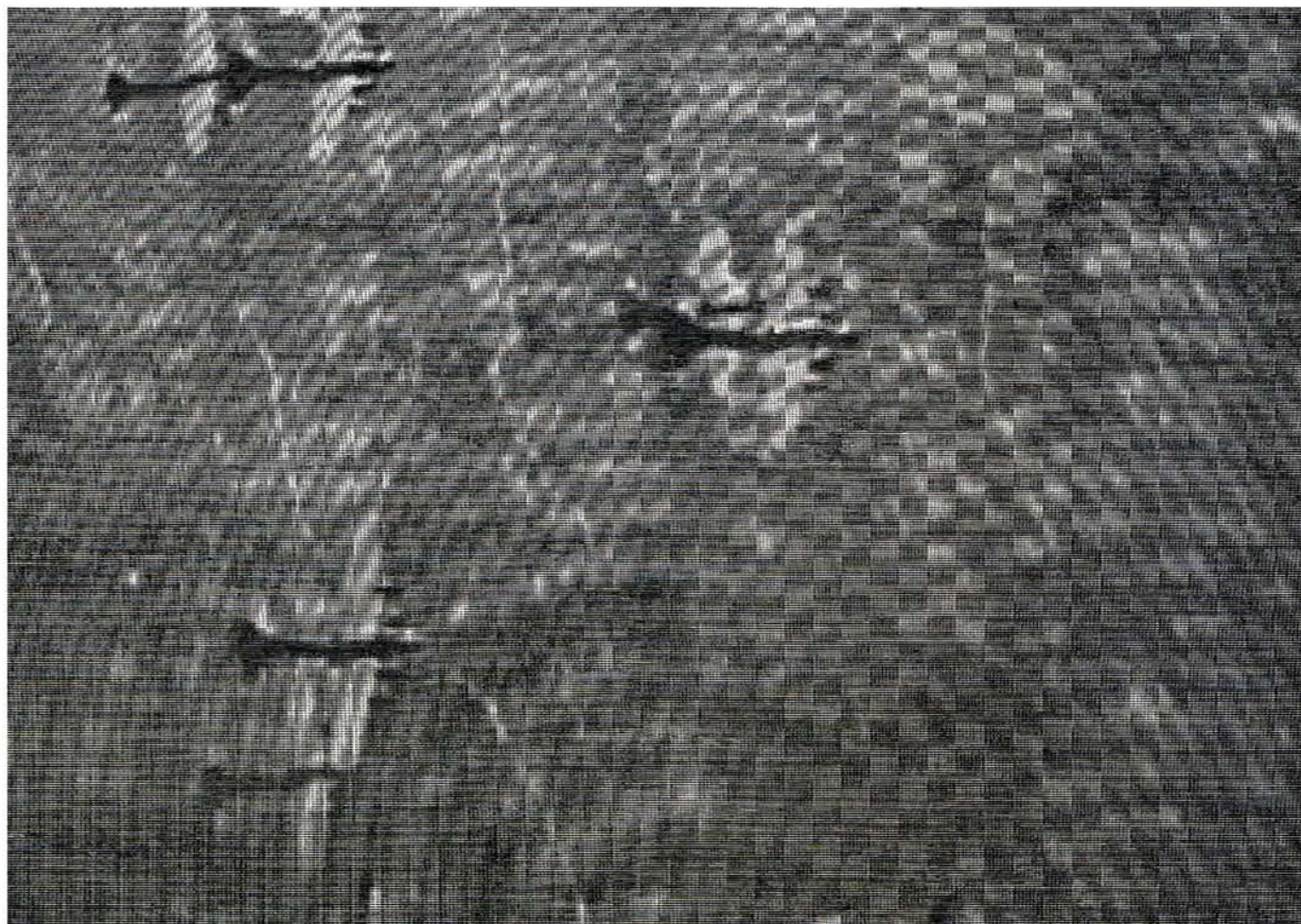
"Philagrafika," at venues all across Philadelphia, through Apr. 11.

ever, were to be broadly, even radically, defined; the aim was to shake off printmaking's esoteric profile. Interviewing potential artistic directors, the group, renamed Philagrafika, settled on Colombian José Roca, fresh off a stint as co-curator of the 2006 São Paulo Bienal. The peripatetic Roca, in collaboration with five local curators, reviewed not just printmakers, but artists working in any medium—including performance

IN HER MONUMENTAL PIECE *LUFTBILD*, SHOWING A WWII ALLIED BOMBING CAMPAIGN, CHRISTIANE BAUMGARTNER COMBINED WOODBLOCK AND VIDEO MOIRÉ PATTERNS TO GHOSTLY AND MENACING EFFECT.

Philagrafika venues—the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Fabric Workshop instead have collateral shows—there was a surprising degree of cooperation throughout the city and beyond, as far away as suburban Swarthmore College (where Daniel Heyman is showing his woodcut project “Bearing Witness,” about Abu Ghraib and other themes, at the List

MANY OF THE PHILAGRAFIKA events have not yet taken place at this writing, so I will concentrate on the core, five-venue exhibition, “The Graphic Unconscious,” with its 34 participating artists or artist collectives contributing works that were either specifically made for the show or are appearing for the first time in the U.S. (A complete schedule is available at Philagrafika’s



and video—that explores “the ubiquitous presence of printed matter in our visual culture” through “accessibility, democratization, dissemination, and transience,” as Roca states in the guidebook. Such elastic conceptual boundaries are not unique: the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, for example, which mounted its 28th installment last fall, has since 2004 stipulated that works of art merely be “reproducible.”

Although two venerable sites initially proposed never signed on as major

Gallery through Apr. 9). And, despite the U.S. economic crisis, which translated into less public funding than anticipated, there is an effervescent optimism among the organizers (particularly the executive director, Teresa Jaynes, who is rumored to have gone for a spell without pay), and every indication that the 2010 festival will have a sequel. Print people, after all, have only rarely joined the high rollers of the art world—they’re used to a bit of struggle.

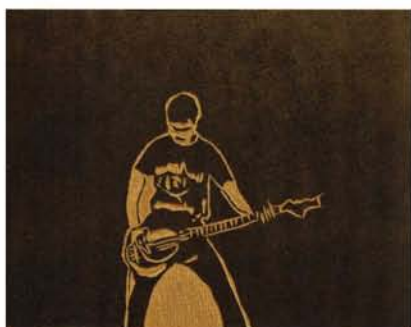
Above, Christiane Baumgartner: *Luftbild*, 2009, woodcut on Kozo paper, 102 1/2 by 137 1/8 inches.

Opposite top, Mark Bradford: *Untitled (Dementia)*, 2009, mixed-medium collage, 114 by 67 1/2 inches.

Near right, Tromarama: *Serigala Militia*, 2006, stop-motion animation made from 402 woodcuts, each 8 3/8 by 11 inches, approx. 4 minutes.

excellent website, which includes a blog; for those who still love to hold a printed object in their hands, a clearly labeled map accompanies the guidebook, available at all the venues.)

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) hosts seven artists who have created large installations co-selected with Roca by Julien Robson, who assumed his position as curator of contemporary art at the institution in late 2008. Christiane Baumgartner, a Leipzig-based artist, uses video captures as the basis for monumental woodblock prints in small editions, each of which can take her a year or more to produce. Her 8½-by-11½-foot *Luftbild* (2009), an aerial image of Allied bombers striking Germany during WWII, is taken from a documentary that surprised her one night as she was watching TV in her hometown (such footage is rarely broadcast in Germany, she told me, and it was particularly unnerving to be not so far from the sites of the strikes). Digitizing the screen images resulted in a moiré pattern that she meticulously incorporated, com-



binning it with the wood grain to create a ghostly and menacing image recalling the late German artist Wolf Vostell's 1960s screenprints of military aircraft, though tilting toward the sublime.

Likewise materializing within a field of visual noise is an image of a great skull by the Puerto Rican-born, Philadelphia-based artist Pepón Osorio (*You're Never Ready*, 2009): derived from an X-ray of his late mother's head, it is inkjet-printed on a bed of glued-down confetti. It looks a bit like an open grave (some bits of confetti having come loose around the edges like soil), lying on the floor not far from the Baumgartner, and making for something of a melancholy air in the room, an effect enhanced by the black-and-white palette of much of the work on view. Bits of buried color, though, peek through the mainly white, distressed signage of Mark Bradford's *Untitled (Dementia)*, 2009, an altered

grid of found posters advertising services for impoverished Alzheimer's patients in L.A. To the posters Bradford added, layers of silicon that he then abraded so only fragments of text are visible—a poignant representation of the selective elisions of memory itself.

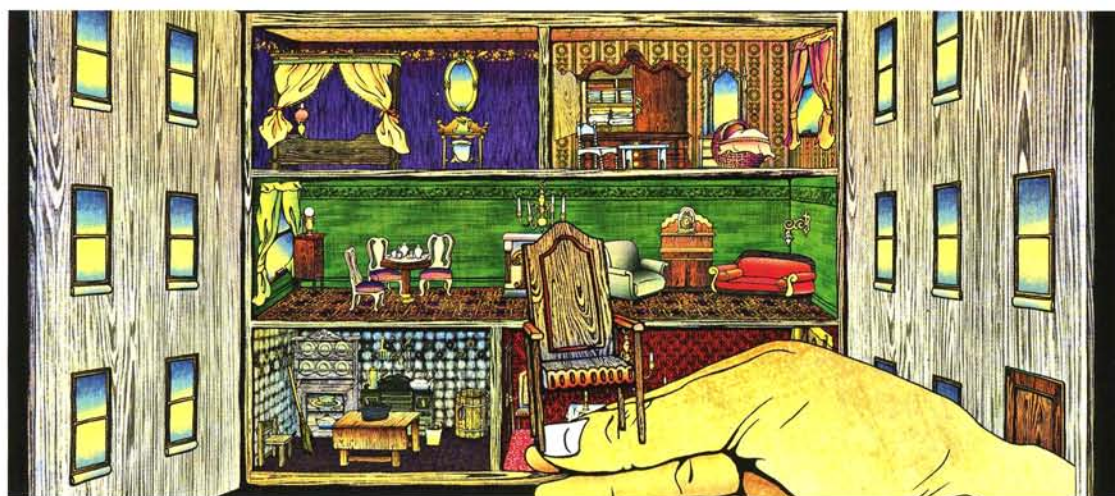
Orit Hafshi, from Israel, contributes the ambitious installation *If the Tread Is an Echo* (2009), wall-mounted wood or paper panels agglomerating into an image of a steep landscape littered with boulders and punctuated by standing beams that could represent either incipient structures or architectural relics. To create the landscape, Hafshi deployed woodcut printing, direct drawing and the inked blocks themselves. Placed before them is a black wooden structure that looks like a dressing room, which might have issued the lone human figure wandering through the landscape beyond.

Lighter in spirit are contributions by the Indonesian collective Tromorama. In their new video *Happy Hour* (2010), etchings of Indonesian currency are animated so that the bills' historical figures, surrendering all gravitas, sing an absurd (and subversive) ditty about politics and partying. Screened on a smallish monitor, the animation is accompanied by a grid of the 49 etchings on which it is based. Tromorama also created the only work shown at PAFA's Frank Furness-designed Historic Landmark Building, across the street from the main Hamilton Building: the amazing 2006 *Serigala Militia*, a 4½-minute stop-action animation of the Jakarta thrash metal band Seringai performing a music video—entirely in woodcut. The flickering light and shadow and the rough expressivity of that medium are marvelously transformed into what otherwise might be

monitors; anonymous faces appear and disappear. Related in process are the latest in Muñoz's ongoing series of "Narcisos" drawings (begun in 1994), in which he stencils his own image onto the surface of water above sheets of various kinds of paper, sometimes collaged with newsprint. As the exhibition progresses, the water evaporates, leaving the self-portrait on paper. Down the corridor, PMA is screening the Japanese artist Tabaimo's *Dolefullhouse* (2007), an animation in which large hands furnish, piece by piece, a colorful Western-style dollhouse. Over the course of the action the hands begin to scratch one another nervously and the dollhouse floods, in the process revealing human organs throbbing behind its walls. While not actually present, prints are alluded to in every facet of Tabaimo's style and in certain iconographic snippets recalling

Japanese manga and ukiyo-e woodcuts. (The erotic octopus of ukiyo-e fame, for example, puts in an appearance, and rainbow-roll effects color the windows.)

Five immersive installations, curated by Lorie Mertes, director of the gallery at the Moore College of Art & Design, tend more toward pattern and ornament. The glass-walled entrance to the Galleries at Moore is covered with a bright orange mural by Gunilla Klingberg (Sweden) made of digitally plotted vinyl shapes; the imagery consists of corporate logos repeated and arranged in mandalalike patterns that camouflage the corporate sources. Regina Silveira (Brazil) fills a room with huge insects, also digitally printed on vinyl, cut out and adhered to floor, walls and ceiling; a ceramic table setting and tablecloth are likewise covered with bugs. Experiencing the work, *Mundus Admirabilis* (2008), is like walking into a print.



Left, Tabaimo: *Dolefullhouse*, 2007, single-channel video projection, approx. 6 minutes.

Opposite top, Gunilla Klingberg: *Brand New View*, 2009-10, plotter-cut vinyl on window; at Moore College of Art & Design. Photo Greenhouse Media.

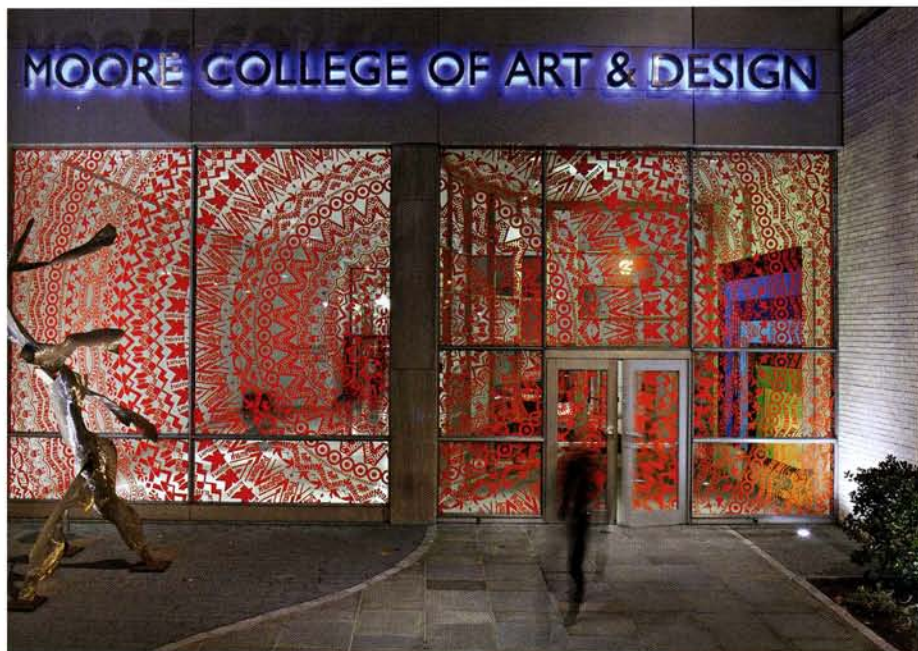
Opposite bottom, Virgil Marti: *VIP Room*, 2010, screen print on paper-backed Mylar, faux fur, mirror ball and mixed mediums; at Moore College. Photo Faye Hirsch.

Below, Oscar Muñoz: *Narcisos*, in process, 1999, mixed mediums, 13¾ by 13¾ by 1½ inches. Photo Constance Mensh, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

boilerplate VH1, featuring the musicians, a wolf and a wolf's skull. Mounted outside the screening room, on the surrounding walls, are the dozens of cut blocks—evidence of the feat.

AT THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM of Art, under the guidance of associate curator of prints and drawings Shelley R. Langdale, Oscar Muñoz has beautifully reinstalled his 2002 *Biografías* in a darkened room. News images of people murdered in the drug wars of his native Colombia were sifted in powdered graphite onto the surface of water in white basins, and the water was then drained. One looks down to watch DVDs showing the process of drainage, and its reversal, on several floor-mounted





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INSTALLATIONS AT MOORE ADDRESS THE ROLE OF PRINTS IN DECOR AND DESIGN, FROM AN ENTRY PATTERNED WITH VINYL CORPORATE LOGOS TO A ROOM WALLPAPERED IN A MYLAR VANITAS.

the U.S. artist Swoon's printed paper figures, posted at various sites in the North Philadelphia neighborhoods that surround Temple Gallery, at the Tyler School of Art. (Sheryl Conkelton, curator of the Temple projects, recently left the gallery as director and now works independently.) Sadly, the German artist Thomas Kilpper, who carves the floors of abandoned buildings into matrices from which he prints gigantic banners, was denied a U.S. entry visa; ironically, we simply get video documentation of his 2009 project that took place at the chilling former headquarters of the GDR Ministry for State Security. Its floor yielded the largest print in the world: *State of Control*, 1,000 square feet altogether.

Most delightful was the foray by Seoul-based duo Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries out of the virtual realm where their projects normally reside (at yhchang.com). Flashing on a white screen in a darkened room is one of their signature word-art pieces in black upper case letters rhythmically synchronized to a hypnotic musical composition by the artists. The work, *My Pretty Peacenik* (2010), concerns a narrator who muses on violence and its resistance; in refusing to return a punch, he loses a peacenik girlfriend, the most beautiful woman he ever dated. There are also nods to Philadelphia: Barthélémy Toguo (Cameroon) has wallpapered a room with hundreds of pages from local newspapers whose texts are buried under ink scribbling, and posted over them photographs of black U.S. politicians. He personalizes the room with a video of himself being



Especially striking is the Philadelphia-based artist Virgil Marti's installation *VIP Room* (2010), occupying a space inside the large street-level window of the gallery. Marti has papered the walls with Mylar screenprinted top to bottom with a repeating floral pattern in white with black shading; only on close inspection do the stems and blooms reveal themselves to be bones and skulls—a vanitas version of "the graphic unconscious." From the ceiling hangs a disco mirror ball; a furry round ottoman is placed at the center of the space. The

room virtually blares onto the street with reflected light; it is at once hot and cold, celebratory and funereal.

During opening week, when I arrived at the Temple University venue of Philagrafika, Pope's billboards (advertising small local businesses like barbershops), though promising in a slide show for the press, had not yet been installed around town. A lamp-making project by the Danish collective Superflex was only just getting under way, and the absurdly frigid temperatures thwarted my hunt outdoors for

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shaved. And Francesc Ruiz (Barcelona) has constructed a kiosk filled with dozens of fake, colorful offset magazines and newspapers with Philadelphia-related headlines.

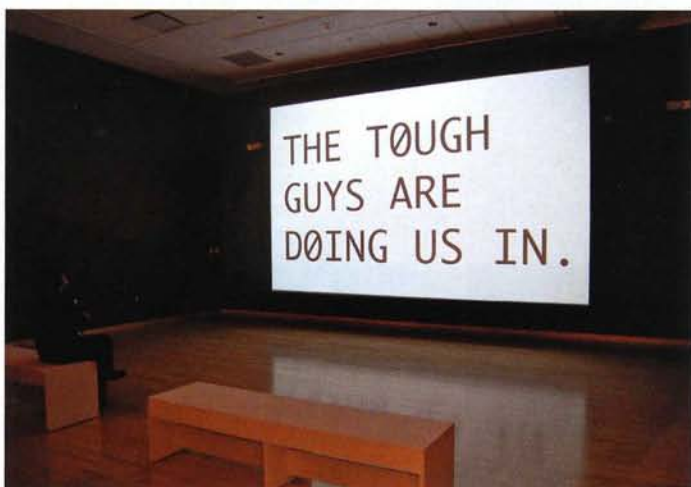
OFTEN MORE EXPLICITLY political, small-scale and "democratic" are works at the Print Center, a modest two-story space not far from PAFA, which for Philagrafika has works by a dozen or so artists and collectives installed check-by-jowl (by its curator of prints and photographs, John Caperton). Sometimes the contributions are "just" prints, as in traditional woodcuts by artist activists Sue Coe (animals turning the tables on humans) and Eric Avery, a Houston-based physician/printmaker who has long taken AIDS as his subject matter. Avery contributes a bathroom installation consisting of his how-to-use-a-condom wallpaper and a toilet seat embossed with the phrase "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," which literally leaves an impression on all who sit there.



Left, Swoon: *Switchback*, 2008, block print with hand coloring; at 9th Street and Germantown Avenue.

Below left, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries: *My Pretty Peacenik*, 2010, HD Quicktime movie, approx. 16 minutes; at Temple Gallery.

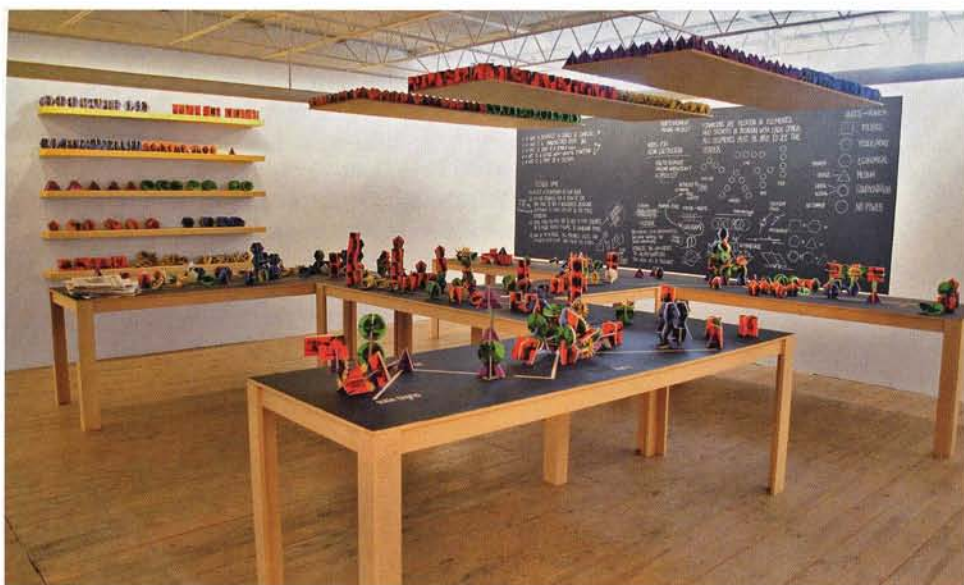
Below, Eric Avery's wallpaper and toilet seat in the bathroom at the Print Center. Photo Andrew Pinkham Photography



The Philadelphia collective Space 1026 has installed a yurt of colorful printed fabrics, and the Barcelona-based Mexican artist Erick Beltrán offers a tabletop game titled *Strategy/Contrastrategy* (2010), in which visitors assemble fluorescent-hued die-cut cardboard playing pieces screenprinted with news images (mine was a hybrid Obama/Berlusconi), moving them around a board with labeled sectors (e.g., "Save Haiti"). The artist, who was installing the piece at the opening, offered a good-natured, pointedly useless lesson while gesturing toward some inscrutable instructions on a blackboard:



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Erick Beltrán: *Strategy/Contrastrategy*, 2010, mixed-medium installation; at the Print Center. Photo Andrew Pinkham Photography.

"Philagrafika" is presently on view [Jan. 29-Apr. 11]; check philagrafika.org for the specific status of exhibitions, along with a calendar of related events.

this game, he says, gives people a chance to "take charge" of the news. The sheer absurdity of the endeavor gives one a palpable experience of the point he is making; yet Beltrán's piece is truly amusing.

The Print Center is staging numerous performances and events over the course of Philagrafika, and it has by far the largest number of participatory

works. The Austrian conceptual artist Julian Deutschbauer is accepting donations of books you've never read, so that shelves empty at the opening will be filled by the end, and questionnaires regarding them mount. The latter include such anxiety-provoking queries as "What kind of secret lies behind your unread book?" and "Since when haven't you read this book yet?"

The Print Center hosted an ephemera exchange and a live one-day event by Drive By Press, which regularly travels the country making print-project pit stops. There are volumes by Dexter Sinister gathered in anonymous library bindings, a case of publications by the South African collective Bitterkomix, and two recent portfolios issued by the New York City curatorial endeavor Dispatch, including Kai Althoff, John Armleder, Eileen Quinlan and five others. The Print Center is the most elastic of the Philagrafika venues, and its participants the least abashed about prints as such. For "accessibility, democratization, dissemination, and transience," no venue beats the Print Center—and nearly anyone can afford to carry away a souvenir. ○



Paired Watercolors, *Sympathy for the Devil* Series, 2010, 17 x 17 in.

FRED GUTZEIT

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