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The Memory of Material

NAPOLEON

When Napoleon embarked upon his expedition to Egypt on the 19th of May 1798, he took with him 8 artists and 27 printers. The invention of photography had not yet been made and printed pictures were required to document and present the findings of the voyage to the home country. The conquering of Egypt did not go exactly the way it was planned; however the voyage became an important part of the history of science. The Napoleon expedition recorded the local life, the flora, the music and architecture with accuracy and dedication. The work resulted in the publication of *Description de L'Egypte*, a collection of texts and engravings, which required over 25 years to be printed.

The making of engravings and prints by the time of Napoleon had become an industry in which successive developments in efficiency returned higher profits. New technical solutions were developed to accelerate print production. For example, Nicholas Conté, who participated in the expedition to Egypt, invented a device that made it possible to engrave the cloudless sky of Egypt in three hours instead of three months. Conté's device increased the mechanical appearance of the prints. This mechanical appearance fitted perfectly with the idea of a well-made print during that period.

Artists and printers took precise measures, which were the basis for prints giving the impression of representing their target with loyalty. Every stone was portrayed in all its detail. The French public regarded these images as convincing representations of the Egyptian monuments. At that time prints were not regarded as art. A printed image was used as a means of reproduction or as means of transmitting information. The ambition was of course to transmit the information as faithfully as possible. In other words, the aim was to produce prints with as little personal touch as possible in order to get close to reality. The engravers used an

alphabet of techniques designed to picture hair, sand, trees etc. The rules of making a print were not to be disobeyed; even skilfulness was to be demonstrated within strict limits.

In illustrated information there was an attempt to come as near as possible to the subject, but there could be a lot of hands between it and the beholder, all of them distorting the message in their way. To interpret a painting to another medium inevitably means the disappearance of some of its elements. Sometimes differences could appear simply because the engraver wanted to improve the composition. In a travel book a view of a city could represent more than one city. As an example the hieroglyphs from a wall of an Egyptian temple could easily come from somewhere else when there was not enough time to copy them on site, or you could find the face of the engraver among the figures in the hieroglyphs as a kind of a souvenir.

In our contemporary eyes, the depictions of the Egyptian monuments made by the Napoleon expedition also describe the way that people looked at the world at that time. We see the interpretation of the engravers and often also the things they wanted us to see. The objectivity that Napoleon's *Description de L'Egypte* offers is no longer good enough for us because our way of seeing has changed irrevocably since the invention of photography. The illusion of reality is nowadays created under totally different conditions.

PHOTOGRAPHY

When *Illustrated London News* reported on the Crimean War in 1853 and 1854, it illustrated the newspaper with xylographies of smooth skinned soldiers. In colourful lithographs published in Paris the same soldiers were shown in their tidy uniforms. During the same conflict, the concept of the 'war photographer' was born. You can see in the photos of William Howard Russel, the war correspondent of *The Times*, soldiers who look totally different from the clinical xylographs, their uniforms ripped, faces dirty and unshaven. The picture of reality changed in one shot when human interpretation was left out. The camera gave the possibility to see with one's own eyes remote places and events. Anyone could now be an eyewitness, thanks to the most powerful instrument of visual communication of all time.

The images produced by graphical techniques in the printing industry were made questionable by photography from the moment it was born. During the early period of the history of photography, there raged an intense discussion on whether this 'machine art' was better or worse in depicting reality. Photography was even claimed to destroy the illusion of the 'masterpiece' of art, which until then was available for examination through reproductions. It was a question of life and death for reproduction prints. The discussion was soon over in favour of photography, but at the same time you can say that the tradition of reproduction never really ended. Craftsmen nowadays still make prints from the sketches or original paintings made by the artist. And lately we have learned also that photographs can lie.

The origin of printmaking is commercial and technical, but as long as the techniques have existed, there have been artists who have been able to find their best features and developed them as a means of artistic expression. If you compare the images from the Crimean War for example with the etchings of Callot and Goya, you can say that the artist has described the reality in a believable way. Behind these works you can find a strong personal experience that passes on to the public without the technique making the message questionable.

Also today artists travel to exotic destinations, like the artists and engravers in the expedition of Napoleon. But what does a printmaker see when he travels for example to India? Do prints that are created as a result of the voyage transmit the social and economic problems of the population? Very often the results are images of beautiful ornaments, exotic tales! And when a printmaker tells about his work, he concentrates in talking about exotic religions and philosophies.

What exactly is the tradition that we printmakers carry forward? Do we continue the work made by the artists who followed Napoleon to Egypt? Do we also offer a smooth skinned picture of reality to the public, as did the lithographers and xylographers during the Crimean war? Or do we travel with our eyes open and transmit reality in all of its bad and good sides like Goya and Callot? Ancient craftsmen of printmaking offered the kind of a reality that the buyer expected from them. Photography proved its power in performing the task of transmitting visual information. The public wanted, after all, to see reality the way it was.

In recent years photography has also gained its place in the art world. It has become an acceptable means of expression, without which it is difficult to think of any international art event. On the other hand it is obvious that printmaking is not presented in these forums. Is it also true here that the art world is more interested in photography's capacity to capture reality than in printmakers' unending fairytales?

THE PRACTICAL HISTORY

The history of printmaking is strongly labelled by practical, technical questions and the demands of its industrial origin. The historical bond with the print industry separates printmaking from other traditional art forms, isolating it in its own separate area. Printmaking techniques have all been, in their time, revolutionizing inventions, which have had an irreplaceable impact, for example on the development of science. An artist works always in contact with tradition, even when the aim is to break it. One is always aware of its existence. The tradition of a painter is the tradition of painting; the tradition of a printmaker is a long story of technical innovation.

To create a facsimile, either from reality or from a painting required to be reproduced, was the goal of printmaking techniques until the mid 19th century. This task created a need to develop techniques that could, as completely as possible, neutralize the presence of the human hand. Alphabets were created to produce standardised traces to illustrate different material elements. The aim was to remove all human interpretation because it was regarded as disturbing objective visual communication.

The development of printing was a condition for the development of all sciences. When the printing process became faster and editions wider, ordinary people could get in touch with knowledge that previously ended up in the libraries of the aristocracy. This development, from the 17th century to the 18th century, created a devastating change in the history of science. Inventions were made with accelerating speed. The print trade flourished, large numbers of newspapers and publications were sold to contemporaries yearning for knowledge. The equipment

and techniques of printmakers have played an important role in a history that tells about the development of science and technique, information, the freedom of word, or actually everything that has to do with our life in the modern world. Printing machines that we use today to produce art have, in their time in some countries, even been *regulated* with licences. Developments have replaced many older techniques within the commercial printing industry. Machines that previously played a central role in the printing industry have been relegated to the artist's studio. They have become authorized instruments for creating art.

A contemporary print workshop resembles an ancient print shop, despite the emergence of new technology. When the printing industry develops even today, the old equipment moves on to be used by artists. But what is really the difference between a copper printing press and a press for printing tapestry? Is the piece of paper which is 50cm long more art than the other one, of which you have maybe 500m? What exactly is the mechanism by which we decide what equipment is suitable for producing art?

ORIGINAL PRINTS

At the end of the 19th century printmaking battled for its independence. The concept 'original print' was born to separate printmaking from reproductions and especially from photography. *La Société des Aquafortistes*, established in 1862, concentrated on propaganda for line etching. The fight against photography was regarded as especially important. Photography, the mirror mechanism, was regarded to be mechanical and empty from all artistic ideas. The idea of an artist who prints for himself, who makes his own plates and regards working with the press an essential part of the creative process, was born.

La Société des Peintres Graveurs, established in 1889, was an exhibition organisation, which aimed to improve the position of original prints amongst traditional art forms. There was no longer a distinction made between different printmaking techniques. All means of expression were regarded as valuable means of original printmaking. One of the goals of the organisation was to get the public to know the secrets of printmaking. Work proofs of different stages of the plates were shown in the exhibitions, and the public was invited to 'step in to the

printmakers studio in the very moment when the painter-engraver pulls a print from his press with the sweat shining on his forehead'.

Original prints were described in many ways. One should hold to the expression of the technique that was chosen. The materials used should be first class; the size of the edition should be able to be shown as well as the destruction of the plates. The printing should happen under the supervision of the artist; at some stage was also born the idea of the greatest possible amount of authenticity occurring in the case when the artist is also the printer of his own works.

Many of these operational models and ways of thinking live on in the work done by various organisations and unions of printmakers. Technical demonstrations and guidebooks made for the public are still a part of the everyday life of printmaking. The public is still supposed to appreciate printmaking at a higher level when it knows more about its technical difficulty. The myth of printmaking as a technically demanding form of artistic expression is still living strongly. We persist in holding onto the tradition of handicraft, even so strongly that we are ready to define the artistic value of a print on the basis of technical stages involved in its production.

But how justified are we in claiming that printmaking is technically more demanding than, for example, sculpture or video art? Painting techniques also require technical knowledge and familiarity with the materials used. Printmakers are claimed to be more punctual, patient and more disciplined than other artists. You can seldom see similar analyses of practitioners of other forms of expression.

It took a long time before printmaking was accepted as a form of art and before it became a subject that is taught in the art academies. The battle about its place in the art world is still going on and it is fought with much the same arguments by which it was originally initiated at the end of the 19th century. The road for photography to the center stage of contemporary art has been less complicated and it has found its place in the sun without technical demonstrations and complicated manifestos about its originality. Printmakers have now, for over a century, made propaganda for the technical difficulty and the demand for handicraft skills of their way of expression. The message has got through: it's exactly from this point of view that the art world looks at printmaking.

Originality and authenticity are values that are manifested year after year. The Ready-made has been a well-known concept for decades, but printmaking is still struggling with these basic problems. Is a print better art if we can with certainty prove that it is an original? The dilemma between multiplicity and uniqueness is an everlasting nuisance for printmakers.

When we adopt printmaking as our way of expression, we accept at the same time the burden of carrying forward the bad conscience that follows with the tradition of reproduction. We assure year after year that we are not the ones who are guilty for this vice. When we define an original print, we define at the same time this, which stays outside of its concept. The manifesto for the 'original print' includes the message that there exist reproduction prints that are without artistic value. It certainly does not make a visit to an art exhibition more pleasant when you know that printmaking is an area where it is better to be suspicious.

PRINT BUSINESS

In print demonstrations the public is shown how time consuming and laborious it is to pull one print. A fresh, newly pulled print is thus the best selling argument at those occasions where the trading is seasoned with demonstrations. Print demonstrations have probably not brought for printmaking the extra artistic value that was the original hope, but they still work very well for commercial purposes. As long as prints have been made they have been connected to trading. Prints have been collected in special print rooms, images of everyday life have been popular on walls in homes, small prints representing the Christ figure have even been sold as an edible medicine! Prints are still made and sold every year in vast numbers.

From the point of view of modern art the selling of prints is a complex question. It's not possible to achieve unique ownership by buying a print and in that way stand out from the crowd. Printing is noted for its ability to sell in quantity; often the artist may be 'commercial' when the prints are spread widely. The buyer of contemporary art often wants to have unique ownership and museums and distinguished collectors are seldom interested in art that is spread widely. On the

other hand, one of the aims in the art of today is to get closer to the general public. Art is required to be a part of the urban environment and everyday life. This purpose is not a new thing for printmaking. Prints want to be seen as an art form that is easy to spread and easy to be reached by ordinary citizens. In many ways even this goal has been reached. Among the general public printmaking is certainly the most familiar and attainable art form.

A printmaker who has experienced a big success in selling may however find himself in a difficult situation. It is easy to start producing exactly what the public wants on the conditions settled by the print business. And what happens if the art one really wants to create is exactly the kind that the audience wants to see on the walls of their homes? For printmakers the big audience is a double-edged sword. It is difficult to draw a line between commercial and non-commercial. The fact remains that vast numbers of prints are produced every year to satisfy the needs of the print market.

For printmakers the equality or the conflict between the 'artistic' and the 'commercial' are everyday problems, towards which everybody working in this field has to take a position, often in a practical way. The valuation of a work of art on the basis of size, genre, the size of edition, the techniques used and the prize, create a problem which is not so easy to solve. In the print business one print goes through many hands, each one of them eagerly taking their cut of the pie. What is left for the artist is usually a fraction of the original amount. The print business today still looks the same as it looked in centuries gone by. The real winner is the machine running the commerce, not the artist.

PRINTMAKING AND PUBLICITY

When the Union of Finnish Printmakers opened their big exhibition at The Helsinki Art Hall, the number of techniques used in creating the artworks in the show was counted on behalf of the Art Hall. The figure was a cause of great concern, as there were almost 30 different techniques mentioned in the catalogue for the exhibition. A similar calculation was not made when The Triennial of Finnish Art was opened in the same art hall two years before. The number of techniques, from video to photography and sculpture, was certainly as big. The number of techniques and

the difficulty in defining them are similar questions in all art made today. In that respect printmaking does not differ from other art of the day.

For some reason we still agree to answer in press conferences questions dealing with technique and selling. And of course the press spreads the information about the technical difficulty in printmaking and the facts about who is selling and what is sold. It is not very meaningful for an individual artist to be categorised. When it concerns printmaking it seems quite often to be like participating in some kind of a national match, where the different sports are the difficulty of the techniques, the tricks used and the number of red dots. For a printmaker it is difficult to be seen only as an artist, and for that we have to thank only ourselves and the enlightening work done for decades.

Authenticity, originality, the absence or presence of the artist, commercialism and entertainment are all concepts that belong to contemporary art discussion. Printmaking as a means of expression poses all of these questions. Paradoxically these questions are rarely discussed within the art produced by printing. As printmakers we excuse ourselves and concentrate on the practical side of our work, even if we could contribute to the discussion with points of view that could have interest for a wider public.

The battle for the original print has now been going on for over a decade, but the position of printmaking does not seem to get much better. It is, anyhow, easy to see that the propaganda gives results. Printmakers have succeeded in getting the public and the art world to see exactly what was shown in the demonstrations. Printmaking has not, however, for a long time, fitted definitions originating from the late 19th century. Prints are nowadays made in various ways that are difficult to define according to the old principles. Development has proceeded to a point where old frontiers between different ways of expression get diffused. Printing techniques are a way of artistic expression in modern art. The conflict between multiplicity and contemporary art does not exist any longer in the same way it did at the beginning of the last century. It is no longer possible to speak of one definition for originality so that it would include all printmaking produced today. In the worst case, strict definitions turn against modern printmaking.