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There is No Original:
Printmaking in the New World Order of the Multiple

If painters and installation artists and all those who do not operate a press are now blithely making what they call Multiples, then what are we to call ourselves? Multipliers? Does that make the press a Multiplication Table?

All absurdity aside, although Printmaking is an antiquated, stogy and awkward label, it is apt. It does not have the newness of the word Multiple. It does not occupy the contemporary scene. It does not have the feel of cutting edge, as if it isn't a "cool" label.

The culture of our language continually defines us. This is not to argue against the proliferation of the Multiple, but to clarify the difference between what is generally now called a Multiple and what it is that Printmakers call a Print. Printmaking is not under the umbrella of the Multiple – and Printmakers do not want to be.

The most basic reductive definition of a Printmaker's work is to make Prints. For this definition it does not matter if they are etchings, lithographs, silkscreens, or any and all variations and combinations. The term Print when used in this specific manner means something that exists without an original. Its only mediation is that of matrix to surface. When defining Print in this way, nothing needs to be added to the definition. What is important is that there is no original.

With that then, the definition of the Multiple is as easily defined. They look like Prints, they may often smell like Prints, but they are not. They are copies of an original. They exist as replicas, say, of a drawing, a painting. Their merit as art is not the question here.

If an artist's dream is that of unmediated work, a Printmaker's best work is that of the unmediated leap from vision to matrix to Print. The Multiple is not unmediated work.

Multiples can be easily confused with Prints but in doing so Multiples invade, marginalize, and denigrate the domain of the Print. Multiple is a broad, sweeping category. When it is used to encompass Printmaking, Multiples blur the value of human experience and the relationship of maker to process.

This includes some far reaching although not far fetched ramifications which exist today. Do we really want to encompass the production of sweatshop workers copying a painting, stroke by stroke, in the name of the original? It occurs to me that the paradigm shift that includes wholesale dismissal of previous modes (be it education, modes of production, or

lifestyle) can be thought of as highly arrogant. New generations turn from old, but wholesale dismissal of traditional values will require course correction.

For me, it is good enough to explore traditional issues such as color and line in the medium of Printmaking. Do we need to ask if the past is vital? The medium of Printmaking is owned by those who respect the process. It is one thing to be marginalized by the original intenders and makers. It is another to be co-opted through ill perceived similarities.

Given: Printmakers feel strongly that Printmaking is important. We talk about its endless possibilities. We talk about each print medium having its own character, its own reason for continuation, its particular interface with an artist/maker. We talk about Printmaking's importance today and, in addition, its continued, varied, and ethically changing role.

Years ago, I heard June Wayne speak in Philadelphia. At her lecture I took to heart her insights concerning our basic lack of information concerning the health of Printmaking especially on the college level. There may be evidence that print departments throughout the country are shrinking, losing ground, disappearing. Perhaps that may be true, but it is also true that our possibilities are without end, the power to communicate is first and foremost ours. It's in our nature, and it's inherent in our medium.

From the stenciled cave walls to forwarding emails, I often run a risk wondering, "What is not Print?" I see the world through a Printmaker's eyes. Within our discipline there is dimension but not edges, diversity but not boundaries. And there certainly must be discourse, but we cannot be subservient or seduced by the obfuscating language of the Multiple.

As information is power, then information will help us coalesce – map where we have been, reconstitute, integrate, form and inform, and help us continue our inventing and innovating. Printmaking in my mind is alive because it is so very not dead.

We are all in motion. It is my belief that we need to stop, collect and sort what we are doing as a whole, and the many ways we are doing it. To make our case vital we need not reinvent what exists. We need to gather/garner what we do, and how we do it. We need to look at our collective approaches from a pragmatic point of view, with the result being a broad based understanding of approaches as to the far-reaching nature of Printmaking.

We need to make Prints. We need to use Printmaking language. We're talking History here.

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