



e u r o p e a n
n e t w o r k
for education and development in
p r i n t m a k i n g

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To be print potent – a trans-intellectual suggestion.

Introduction:

This spring I attended a printmaking seminar in Helsinki. A considerable part of the discussion stranded on how printmakers ought to behave to be regarded as contemporary artists. Some of the speakers were quite clear: most important was to avoid all talk about techniques and methods. How you made things in art was insignificant. Nobody was interested, it was embarrassing to talk about that. The contemporary artworld was not interested in such skills. Nor was the art market. The discussion revealed a conflict between two positions in relation to the contemporary art world. But it did not clarify what it was about.

When I worked as a professor in textile art at The School for Design and Craft at Gothenburg University I fully realised that I was a trans-intellectual. I shuttle between two intellectual activities: one is what I do as an artist: creating or processing artefacts, sometimes in printmaking, in order to have them carry meaning. The other is trying to analyze and understand what this artefactual activity really is.

The knowledge production I was familiar with, as a hands-on/artefactual artist, was not part of the academic understanding of knowledge. I also found that within the university, academics often saw themselves fit to define the experiences of others, but totally unused to regard themselves as ignorant. Practitioners in art were not trusted to articulate or explain their artistic experience. In this we were expected to ask for help. Preferably from someone with a phd. No matter what kind of phd as long as it was a formal phd. This was frustrating.

The need to strive for a democracy of experiences in higher art education was obvious. The seminar in Helsinki was yet a reminder that this is a question about knowledge production in art that has a founding bearing on how we understand art. Instead of just adapting to the ruling hegemony and avoid whatever appears to be embarrassing we should take a closer look. We should go deeper into and examine what position printmaking holds in our contemporary understanding of art. And why.

In 1975 artist Sarah Charlesworth wrote: "We are simultaneously both products and producers of the culture we live in. But we seldom regard the value or function of our labour." ¹

This statement is still valid. It is also a keystone for *ENDEGRA European Network for Development and Education in printmaking (Grafik)*:

ENDEGRA is a network between professional print shops and printmakers that started to grow 5 years ago and now has nodes in 8 European countries. It came about to meet a need to share advanced knowledge production within the field of printmaking. To clarify the value and the function of our labour and to bring about relevant acting spaces for development and education in printmaking.

ENDEGRA had it's first physical meeting in Mölndal, Sweden in 2009. Since then we work to develop an artist in residence program on a sort of low budget/bare foot basis. We have met in Imatra, Finland, in Odense, Denmark and the next get together will be in Dresden, Germany in 2013. This year, we exchange the Endegra meeting to München Lithotage and thank you for opening this possibility to partake of exhibitions, to discuss, explore possibilities and meet with colleagues. ENDEGRA is about the practical work in art. To be engaged in this practise used to legitimize both art and the artist. But terms and preconditions have changed. In ENDEGRA we realize that we have to analyze, define and articulate our artistic experiences. But we don't go elsewhere to look for help. We work as topographers to describe our where-about in art. Our practice is an adequate reference system.

In this talk I will present some of the topography we have mapped so far in order to clarify contemporary terms and conditions for printmaking.

When we look at art today, what do we see?

Contemporary art is often described as pluralistic. You can do anything with, or without, any material and anything can, with the institutional theory of art, become art. Art that is expected to over-ride boundaries, challenge, provoke and question anything. And we do

¹ <http://www.sarahcharlesworth.net> "A declaration of dependence"

see international biennials in art that show a great big diversity. Anything seems to be possible! And yet: all is not well.

I see two problems: one is that the diversity that is being shown in big exhibitions is not granted in the layers of professional artmaking where advanced knowledge is produced. It is difficult for artists to get the time and space needed to do serious work. The other problem is the contemporary conceptual and textual approach to art.

Before I go into this it is important to make one thing very clear: it is not conceptual *art making* that causes trouble. The problem is that the conceptual, textual approach has become the overriding perspective of art in our time. This means that we get a poor distribution of possibilities for other practices, a lack of artistic acting spaces, difficulties in art educations and so on.

This overriding textual approach is not isolated to the contemporary art world. The art world mirrors a cultural phenomenon that has grown in all parts of the western culture during the last century. We see this theoretical attitude in commercial and industrial life, in management quality methods. We see it in our post modern consumer society where we, as consumers, crave the commodities but pay little attention to how they are produced. We see it in all the planning, documentation, evaluation and quality assurance that is called for in all of society. Control and efficiency are the key words.

The ruling contemporary hegemony is founded in a theoretical interest for life and art that has developed into an orthodox and unquestionable belief. As such it causes intellectual deficiency diseases and makes people react to theories as if they were natural phenomena you have to adjust to, like the weather or outbursts of volcanos, and not man made, possible to question, challenge and reconceptualize. And partly, the seminar in Helsinki became an example of this.

We can oppose this current overuse of a textual approach. But we can not disregard it. We simply have to deal with it. To oppose it we have to use it. To defend or to get an acting space in art today, you have to verbalize your artistic experience, your needs and demands. If you don't do it someone else will do it and set the rules for you.

Now, if you uncritically go along with the overriding textual approach, you become a part-owner in the contemporary hegemony. As such an uncritical part-owner you become an oppressor. And you don't even have to be aware of it. Perspectives drip down from theories and tend to appear as self-explaining common sense. And what is regarded as common sense, is very hard to criticize. But if we don't question the textual priority, we oppress knowledge production in art that has no need for a textual approach to perform.

As long as one way of making art overrides another, a democratic, equal discussion about terms and conditions will fail to appear. It leaves us with petty quarrels and positional struggles where they do no good. A strive for democracy is needed. But it is not how art looks, how it expresses itself, that should be democratized. It is the preconditions that allows it to be made that needs democratic agreements.

To be able to understand and challenge our contemporary understanding of art we have to focus on knowledge production rather than on views on art.

Art is communicative activities. Expandable possibilities that stem from our lingual capacities. An existential tool for interhuman communication.

It is important to acknowledge the necessary preconditions for different ways of making art. Instead of founding our understanding on the interpretation of the finished work we should focus on how art is made.

The last 50 years, art has gone through radical changes. As it has many times before. If you regard art as a vast and eternal human area of lingual activity, maybe these changes won't matter so much. For us here today, they are crucial.

- When conceptual art had it's break through in the USA in the 1960's, a radically changed understanding of art was introduced. The spectrum of art expanded and now presented two different ways of artmaking.
- To map the consequences of this we cannot disregard the dominating linear understanding of progress and development in western culture.
- The new conceptual understanding of art caused a change of terms and conditions for all kinds of artmaking. But these changes are not much analysed or discussed in a knowledge perspective.

So: visual art divided into two principal lines. One was the old artefactual way of making art. It still creates or processes artefacts to make them carry meaning or function or both. This is the art tradition that printmaking stems from. The other principal line was the new conceptual artmaking that set focus on ideas and used verbal language as it's main material.

Artefactual artists outside the Anglo-American culture in the 1960s had little or no tradition of articulating their artistic experience. It had simply not been called for. The artmaking itself legitimized both the art and the artist. When I was trained in printmaking at the art academy in Stockholm between 1983-88 this was still the case in Sweden. The work I did legitimized me as an artist and art itself. I did not have to write texts to articulate it's meaning.

A founding difference between the two ways of artmaking was how they related to and used verbal language.

In the best of worlds, the expansion could have made room for different kinds of art to perform on equal terms. We could have taken an interest in how these terms differed from one another. But the dominating linear understanding of progress and development in western culture allows one thing at a time to take the lead. The past is, with this approach, easily rejected and regarded as obsolete. And differences are thus reduced to conflicts of interest and positional struggle.

(Another founding difference is that the artefactual way does not question art as a phenomena. In conceptual art this was from the beginning one of the key issues. The borders of art had to be questioned and challenged.) As the conceptual, textual attitude in art obtained the interpretative prerogative, all of the artefactual tradition, printmaking included, was put under pressure. And we did not have verbal articulation nor the textual tools to reciprocate. The reaction amongst artefactual artists, like printmakers, was instead often confusion, frustration, anger, sometimes bitterness and a servile adoration of the past.

Philosopher Marcia sa Cavalcante Schuback² points out two current views on the past that both get us stuck in the linear attitude: one is the servile adoration, that wants everything to be as it once was and disregards any changes. The other view is an aggressive denial of the past. Both attitudes are found in art today. Both are equally useless.

The linear art history is mostly produced by people who are not practitioners in art themselves. It does not reveal the spatial openings that art creates in time. In the actual artmaking the artist can experience this as being offered a state of exception. That time becomes a room. It lets us move freely in all directions, work freely with both the living and the dead. In our contemporary topography of art we can state that printmaking is an area where the past, the present and the future combine a vivid diversity of complications and possibilities.

The description I have given here, of two principal lines of knowledge production in art making, does of course not present an imprint of real life. Real life is much more complex and difficult to grasp. I launch a simplified model, an adequate generalization, if you want. It is not meant to describe the actual situation. It is a suggested tool to use when talking about the complicated reality. When trying to map the current topography in artmaking to find out what impact it has on different kinds of knowledge production in art. To find out what it takes for art to come about.

A theoretical interest in the artefactual art practice is interesting and can be very rewarding. But it is not a founding precondition to activate the art practice itself.

The founding preconditions are activated by a hereditary accessibility that we have to take care of and charge with potential.

When I started to verbally articulate and analyse my artistic experience it was not due to any inner need. It was the growing textual attitude around me that forced me to get involved with theoretical analyses in art. That was the only way I could try to find out what was going on. In the process I became a transintellectual. For 18 years now, I have shuttled between the artefactual artmaking and the analytical reflection on that artmaking and it's terms and conditions. There is an undeniable distance between the two. It is not possible for me to be in both places at the same time. This has called for the topographical mapping metaphore: I have a need to get familiar with the terrain in art were I work. I have to know how different places in that terrain relate to each other. And the artistic knowledge production is dependent on it's biotope.

I have many colleagues who do not need or want to get involved in any special theoretical analysis. They just want to work with their art. For me it's very important, not just to overlook, tolerate or accept such a standpoint, but to defend it. It means defending diversity in artistic knowledge production. It means defending the founding hereditary accessibility. Every human activity has it's paractice, also thinking and writing, but all practical activities do not share the same terms and conditions. And all artists do not need to verbalize their work in order to perform and do great art. Contemporary verbal demands do not necessarily belong to the artmaking in itself but to expectations from the overriding hegemony.

² <http://philpapers.org/s/Marcia%20Sa%20Cavalcante%20Schuback>

We need to democratize the *discussion* about art and we need to democratize the understanding of artistic knowledge production and terms and preconditions of different kinds of artmaking.

After 50 years with this expanded field in art, we have not yet managed to implement such a discussion. Maybe it's no big deal. These things take time. The pendulum swings. But still, maybe now is a good time to trumpet the democracy of experiences? Maybe it is time to question the hegemony of the contemporary art world. And from there renew the discussion about the endless questions: what is art? What do we use it for?

Before I continue I have to state: there is no immanent conflict between different ways of making art. The conflicts that arise are always positional and have to do with the linear understanding of progress, with power structures within the art world, grant systems, art education and so on. And it is not theories or conceptual art in itself that is the problem here. The problem we have to get square with, in both life and art, is the contemporary orthodox priority of theoretical analyses. It causes an uneven distribution of power between different kinds of knowledge production in art. It is time to counter the lack of democracy in these matters.

Art itself cannot, of course, be "democratic". There is no meaning to reach agreements when it comes to the expressions of art. How art shows itself and communicates. On the contrary. In this interpretative activity we can be, and must be, *agonistic*. It means that parties acknowledge one another as legitimate opponents.³ The interpretation of art is where subjective opinions should be able to celebrate victories or lick their wounds.

It would, however, be meaningful to strive for democracy when it comes to the actual art making. The actual knowledge production. In defining what it takes for a certain work of art to come about. In creating usable preconditions for the actual artistic knowledge production.

This is the area of founding preconditions where democratic values are important. This is where we ought to cooperate and use our political capacity, to identify what we need, to mount useful and relevant acting spaces for different kinds of art production. Be it artifactual or textual. This is where art and artists develop. A curator that does not understand and defend this founding knowledge production when looking for artists to exhibit, performs phlebotomy on art.

What is needed for works of art to come about?

What conditions does an opera singer need to develop full capacity? What does a ceramist need to be a good thrower or to work conceptually with ready made? What are the best conditions for someone who wants to develop relational art? Cartoon artists? What do they depend on? Artists working with sound or light? What is it that a photographer or a painter cannot do without? What do printmakers need to be print potent?

What needs to get attention and to be discussed in the knowledge production and what needs to be set up for the actual art making? How can we cooperate to get real?

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agonism>

The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas is one of several contributors to how a deliberative (to consider all sides of an issue) democracy could help solve problems in politics. The ideal, according to Habermas, would be a dialogue where all kinds of power struggle and conflict of interest is absent. The dialogue should be characterized by a desire to understand each others arguments. Habermas expresses a need to be exact with words so that they will carry the same meaning to all participants in the dialogue. Something that is easier said than done and also something that has rendered the idea quite a lot of criticism.

But transferred to a more limited discussion about artistic knowledge production, the idea of deliberative democracy occurs to be practicable. It seems possible to try out a communicative situation where the struggle for power really could be abandoned. And that is when you focus on *how* a work of art is made from an earnest interest that it *should* be made. You don't even have to like opera, or printmaking for that matter, to respect what is needed, for a fellow artist in that field, to perform.

Since 40 years art is defined according to the institutional theory of art: art is what established institutions and agents of the art world defines as being art. From the beginning the theory did not claim to define "good" art. It was made in a situation where art was disconnected from the artefact and it's meaning became dependent on verbal articulation; text. Anything could become art. So how was art supposed to be recognized? This question called for a new straining device to separate and position art in the art world from not art/no position in the art world. It rendered a situation where we have come to regard the position in the art world as equivalent to artistic quality.

A position in the forefront, with a lot of media attention equals good quality. An invisible position with no media attention equals bad quality or just uninteresting. The necessary, advanced, basic knowledge production in art does not often attract media attention and the institutional theory has thus helped to place this in an isolated misunderstanding.

The theory rules, but it provides a poor groundwork for the wide spectrum of what is really going on in art. Even the founder of this theory, american art critic and former professor in philosophy George Dickie⁴, admitted that it was a circular theory: *the institutions and agents of the contemporary artworld choose art and artists that use and thus confirm the theories and philosophical paradigms that the artworld has already declared valid*. This has for a long time promoted an uncritical willingness to adjust to the authority of the art world. Especially among students in higher art education. In the last two or three years, however, I have seen tendencies of rejection to this order of things, which I find very promising.

I say it again: it is nothing problematic with the conceptual artmaking. The problem is that the conceptual approach has become an overriding paradigm for all artmaking instead of being one of several ways in the wide spectrum of art.

We live in a culture that communicates visually. We are surrounded by an omnipresent commercial use of images. But the world, including the contemporary artworld, is dominated by a textual and conceptual way of understanding art. The visual communication that needs little or no verbal explanation is hot stuff in the commercial

⁴ <http://tigger.uic.edu/~gdickie/>

business but often disregarded in the contemporary art field and in society. Schools teach our children to read and write text. But in visual Communication we are almost illiterate. We have to examine this contradictory phenomena.

Poor terms and conditions for artefactual artmaking, like printmaking, does not just cause a loss of traditions, skills, methods and techniques. It causes a loss of language and expression. It endangers the hereditary accesbility in art that we are responsible for.

A radical change of focus is needed; from position to production. To be able to discuss qualities in art today, we should not end discussions about how art looks communicates, but add a serious discussion about artistic knowledge production.

The institutional theory of art has outlived it's usefulness. It provides nothing but positional struggles and strategies, supported by a widely spread orthodox belief in a textual approach that is stuck in a blind alley. Instead we could start to try out a heterodox theory of art that not only allows for different ways of art to perform but PRESUPPOSES this diversity. Our political ability could be well used when we start to sort out what we need to agree upon from that which does not need agreements.

Art itself cannot and should not be democratized. The emancipation of the wide spectrum in art begins when we shift focus from position in the artworld to production of art.

Nina Bondeson, september, 2012



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