

Creative and Multidisciplinary Etching in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: *In our capacity as creative artists, researchers and fine arts professors, most part of our activity focuses on the relationships between people and creativity, technology, and resources, and, most frequently, what we aim to offer are new enjoyable and subversive ways of interacting with these three fields. As art teachers, we ask "why and how" to teach dynamic bearing in mind that digital technology will undoubtedly impact on contemporary art practice.*

KEYWORDS: *Analogue Graphic Production, Artistic Education, Digital, Technologies, Etching, Internationalization of Art Teaching.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the development of the so-called digital art promised to renew the distribution of artistic creation. Although terms such as *Net(dot)art* or *Arte.en.red* – referring to a genre of artistic productions expressly created on and for the Internet –, *digital printing* or *virtual reality* are no longer alien to researchers, artists, curators and the general public, the fact is that the promise of *dematerialization of the artistic objet* (Kuspit, 2004) does not seem to have been accomplished: art exhibitions are still there.

Nevertheless, the different art forms, intended both for and outside of the Internet, have been subsumed in the flow generated by increasing digitization, digital production techniques, and the establishment of a feedback loop between what is found on line and off line: “frontiers are pleasingly kept blurry and the practices, both analogue and digital ones, seem to revive each other” (Herrera, 2012). A great many artists have included digital technologies in their analogue graphic production in order to create new narrative discourses. Among those I would like to mention – the multitalented Ellen Gallagher or Bruce Conner, Seher Shah’s layer superimpositions... - I think Christiane Baumgartner’s work is highly representative. Her large format woodcuts embody the balance between the analogue and the digital image. A sense of duality that connects many aspects of her artistic practice, both in the process of joining two different technologies (xylography, as an early method of printing, and digital technology, which she uses in order to handle, filter and prepare the image that will then be engraved and printed manually) and in the contrast between the black of the ink and the white of the paper, between the wood relief and its absence or between binary digits 0 and 1 (Coldwell, 2011).

There can be no doubt whatsoever that digital technology has changed the way we relate to each other, look at each other, gather information, do the shopping, write, read, think, or simply, “are” (on line, obviously). We browse the Internet, skim texts, cut and paste, establish and follow hyperlinks, get lost on the way, but also find “other ways”, relate ideas and concepts, and break hierarchies. The artist is not an exception, on the contrary, their agility to think in pictures turns them into the perfect consumer of digital technology: they tag, log in, browse and select, re-read, add quotes and references to generate new expressive discourses.

Digital technology modifies the way in which research, management, production, editing and publication processes are performed, while enabling greater autonomy and, of course, gives rise to changes in the way in which communication, distribution, and consumption are carried out. Never before have we been so connected nor have we had so much information at our fingertips. We live in an age of hybridization, in which we merge and share information with Internet users. For example, interesting considerations regarding hybrid art can be found in the article of Rosseti (2007) article, *Del arte híbrido al arte espectáculo* (‘From Hybrid Art to Show Art’). Obviously, this situation has its downside since we might not be programmed to bear this deluge of information. Some neurologists warn us about possible harmful effects that we might be confronted with in the immediate future, such as lack of concentration, exhaustion, etc. Paul Valéry may have been a visionary when he expressed the annoyance that museums caused him: ‘How tiring, I say to myself, how absurd! This is inhuman. It is not genuine. This vicinity of independent and conflicting wonders, the more alike the more conflicting, is paradoxical [...] However, our legacy is overwhelming. The modern man, exhausted by the enormity of their technical means, has become impoverished due to the very excess of their riches [...] An excessive capital and, therefore, unusable’.

Indeed, the information which travels on the Internet is excessive and its obsolescence is such that content updating is “at the very least a utopian” task. **Bas Martín (2012)** expresses the idea in the following way: ‘While I am writing these words, I am aware of the fact that they will have already become outdated tomorrow’, and warns us that ‘what is relevant today is already outdated with regard to tomorrow, to the modern, which should not make us yield to senseless Manichaeism’.

For better or for worse, digital technology dynamics undoubtedly has an effect on contemporary artistic practice. New research trends appear which give rise to inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary relationships based on the exchange of ideas, conceptions, materials and techniques, at the service and in the interest of the artist’s own expression. The nineteenth-century image of the creative artist, confined in their study, touched by inspiration, gives way to the art producer who usually works in a team, sharing major or minor artistic projects which involve different professionals -illustrators, designers, editors, audiovisual specialists, etc. - who pursue the same objective. The change takes place not only in the way in which art is produced but also in the consequent economic relationships (art gallery owners or directors, art dealers, museums, etc). Indeed, a whole paradigm of new economic and social relationships opens up in front of us such as the collaborative consumption of services offered on the Internet: car-sharing, accommodation (Airbnb) or the WIR currency, among others (**Bendell, 2013**). Karl Marx used the term “interstice” to define trading communities that eluded the capitalist economic framework since they were not ruled by the law of profit. **Bourriaud (2006)**, in his work *Relational Aesthetics*, defends that the work of art, beyond its commercial or semantic value, represents a “social interstice”, i.e., a space for dialogue, for human relationships, which offers alternative possibilities of exchange with respect to the communication areas and systems imposed upon us. Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics entails a change in the aesthetic, cultural and political approaches of art. The author defends that current art is relational in the sense that it is based on human interrelations with regard to a work of art, understood as a period of time to experience. Thus, he moves away from the aristocratic conception of art as an autonomous and private space which the visitor, viewed as a collector, must cover. A new time-space dimension will also be established, in which the length of the artistic experience (which is evidenced in *performances*, video art, etc) as well as the creation of unconventional artistic spaces such as *street art* or *net art* among others will gain importance. Likewise, attempts will be made to destroy the prejudice that the work of art must be an object, alleging that it may also correspond to an action.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In light of this complex, plural and dynamic situation, in our capacity as modest fine arts professors, we wonder “what and how” to teach. The methodological approaches and the educational dimension of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) oblige universities to provide theoretical and practical training at the same time, in direct connection with professional reality. When we deal with the professional reality of a graduate in Fine Arts a wide range of possibilities opens up before us: visual artist; teacher of workshops, activities, international workshops, further education, teaching and research departments of museums and other training offers related to art; professionals of curatorial activities, or curators, cultural managers and managers of artistic heritage; creators in the sphere of photography, audiovisual arts and new technologies, in cultural and creative industries; expert in visual culture and artistic consultancy; art consultant, etc. Within this multidisciplinary field we can distinguish a characteristic that all these professional profiles have in common. It is the capacity to relate to people and work in a team, understood as the capacity to establish trusting and leadership relationships, as well as to cooperate and learn from one another, so that communication become fruitful for all the members of the cooperating group.

With the aim of promoting proactive training and the capacity to work in a team, the participation of students and teachers in activities of *internationalization* of art teaching is one of the resources used in the Faculty of Fine Arts, at the University of Barcelona (**Figuera & Crespo, 2012**). Among the collaborative actions with international educational centers we highlight the modality of networking and the use of the blog as a means of communication. Within this field, our collaboration with Mexico, Ecuador and Poland, in the development of a research project regarding the *Libro Arte/Abierto* (which can be accessed in the blog <http://libroarteabierto.blogspot.com/>) is an example of an important experience.

Another internationalization activity that we have gained certain experience in is the *Exhibition Project*. For example, the exhibition *LiberoLibriEssegi. Rivisitazione di libro (2009)*, carried out in Mercato Centro Culturale Comunale d’Argenta, in Ferrara. The project engaged teachers and students of Accademia di Belle Arti di Alarino (Palermo), Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna, Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera (Milan), Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, Accademia di Belle Arti di l’Aquila, Accademia di Belle Arti di Bari and the Faculty of Fine Arts of Barcelona. Another example is the exchange-exhibition *Quelli del Non-Toxic (2011)* involving the Accademia di Belle Arti di Palermo, the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Valencia, and the

Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Barcelona. Last but not least, we would like to mention the exhibition project entitled *Grafica Contemporanea: Presente e futuro. Quattro visioni a confronto*, shown throughout this academic year in the Aula Magna in Bologna, which involved the participation of Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna (organizer) and the Faculties of Fine Arts of Barcelona, Granada and Portugal.

III. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The result of these actions highlights the importance of digital technology as a portal of communication and knowledge exchange, on the one hand, and the potential of artistic creation which derives from it, on the other. Analogue and digital practices reciprocally feedback and give rise to formerly unconceivable communication and expressive possibilities. It might be said that the old formulae, according to which art was based on the creation of beauty or the imitation of nature, have become obsolete, and in the times in which we live art is a dynamic quality, in constant transformation, and, what is more, immersed in the mass media, in the channels of consumption, most times with an ephemeral aspect, of momentary perception, equally present in the idea and in the object, in its conceptual genesis and in its material execution. Finally, I think that in our capacity as researchers, professors, and artists, we should be able to link technology and art in the adventure for knowledge with a view to establishing integrated and integrating visions of the world. Donald Kuspit defends that a work of art must entail aesthetic experience, emotion, and sensitivity; however, I would add that a work of art, regardless of technique, format or support, must be based on the principles of creativity, responsibility and quality.

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