

Parergon

At the launch of the first issue of this journal at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney five years ago, I posed the rhetorical question, why a new publication on contemporary art – of *ink on paper* – in this age, of the seemingly bottomless pit of imperceptibility of the Internet (with its doctrinaire adherents)? The following is an extension of those original remarks.

For those who don't know me, and even those who do but of occupying other professional arenas, I was born into a printing family – I'm often reminded that this was quite some time ago, last century! – into the realm of the analogue, of lead typesetting and its tactile impression into paper, of chases and formes, of wood and metal 'furniture', of imposition stones and stonemen in leather aprons, of linotype hot metal typesetting machines (and typesetters with tips of fingers, or more, missing from a multitude of workplace misfortunes), of slugs, points, picas and ems, of Heidelberg Platens and GTOs, of rubber stereotypes (anybody know what they were?), of octavo, quarto and foolscap, of quires and reams. This was an odoriferous world of tenaciously viscous inks, of pernicious fixers and cleaners, and my favourite – solvents! *The perfumes of the print room!*

Being therefore into 'substance abuse' from school age, as an artist, independent curator, writer and publisher, I had free entry for several decades to the family company printroom; Heidelberg GTOs (offset) and Platens (letterpress), metal and plastic plate-makers, bindery machines, the guillotine and other equipment. The company joke was that when I came in through the front door my father ran out the back door; he didn't want to know what I was doing. The Heidelbergs sustained a hammering – catalogues, anthologies, posters, one-off artist prints and books. As a senior government arts functionary said years later at the Post West Gallery anthology launch (being one of its directors I decided to archive the endeavour: the publication, now the *only* tangible record along with another analogue, Kodak 35mm slides), the state's visual art history had much to thank my father. These enterprises came to a halt when the printing union introduced blanket creativity-buster rules and much to my father's wrath, broad-painted yellow lines on the printroom and bindery floors to guide us mere mortals to what was (obviously) safe or otherwise (provoking him to testily query where he might be allowed to walk in his own business. But here I digress...)

Decades of this exposure are surely responsible for my then becoming, perhaps somewhat dazed if not confused, in a career sideways shift, director of the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, which meant I was synchronously editor of *Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet* magazine, a *doppel* role for the next fifteen years during which I commissioned and edited sixty issues of the latter; and to stretch the publishing-portfolio rubber band, fourteen artist monographs and art history anthologies, and sixty-five exhibition catalogues. In 2015, I converted to director-editor emeritus, so perhaps the part answer to my posed question at that launch was that I couldn't help myself. I missed the effluvium of the printroom, of ink on paper.

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These days there's nothing to inhale; goodbye petroleum-based inks, goodbye vertiginous solvents, printrooms having gone green with their impressing environmentally responsible "printing solutions" (the oleaginous verbalism persists). But it had to come—ISO9001 Quality Management, ISO14001 Environmental Management and ISO12647 Colour Management Systems certifications, soy-based inks, computer programmed machinery, digital printers, *et alia*: kowtow. (There are some of us who can smell where a book has been printed, for example in the United States, Italy, or perhaps Australia. But to expand upon this might be too much of a digression...)

Relocating to Sydney in 2016 I thought I'd cultivate the international directors, curators, artists, writers and cultural institutions with whom I had worked over the previous twenty years, and continue my servitude to this seemingly dinosaur, now arcane thing called reading, examining and interpreting the analytical, critical *printed* word: ink on paper. I decided to produce a biannual journal focusing on the greater picture of the art historical, the political and the theoretical in visual art, and in strategically bypassing predominant Euro-American cultural authority, its content would engage all Asian regions from the Middle East to Southeast Asia to the Asia-Pacific, which I consider determine more relevant historical and current affinities with contemporary Australian art and society. Researching a title, evaluating numerous brainwaves only to discover I'd been beaten to the impression, so to speak, I chanced upon the word *divan*: from the Persian *dīwān*, and Turkish *divan*: a word with multiple connotations and narratives—an account book, a book of poems, a collection of literary passages, an archive, a book of accounts and a collection of sheets, which over time morphed into an assembly, an office of accounts, a custom house, a government bureau or councils chamber (where such documents were read), to a long-cushioned seat which in this sense entered European languages. (The modern French, Dutch, Spanish and Italian words *douane*, *aduana*, and *dogana*, respectively, meaning customs house, also come from *dīwān*.) I felt that the title should determine the content focus and be layered; as such it reflects a shift in meaning over time, coexistent with evolving historical relationships between the East and West: its rationale and philosophy being History underscores The Contemporary.

At the time of the journal's conception I realized that it was the centenary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the following year would be that of the Balfour Declaration, both European assertions that after 600 years of Ottoman rule had carved up the Middle East into mostly colonial subplots, the disorder and turbulence of which are still being endured today. That time also saw the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Australian referendum that amended the Constitution, the result of which effectively recognized Indigenous Australians as citizens for the first time. The histories of both underline contemporary art: in the Middle East (even pre-Arab Spring), notably Turkey, Lebanon and the Emirates, and since the 1990s Indigenous visual art has become a dynamic and resonant force in Australian contemporary culture.

So why ink on paper? Over the journal's composition and evolution, the argument over the viability of print versus digital has been enduring. I've already referred to the latter form as the seemingly bottomless pit of imperceptibility, its omnipresence availing the reader lazy, and *lite*. Scientific studies have shown that given reading develops imagination, induction, reflection and critical thinking as well as vocabulary, technology, in assuming an ubiquitous role in daily lives, has been responsible for the subsequent decline in critical thinking and analysis. In 2011 Pulitzer Prize Finalist Nicholas Carr examined in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, the physical and cultural consequences of the Internet and its subsequent effects upon the ability to read and think. As we know reading a book is a multi-sensory experience, using not just sight but

also touch (and smell, perhaps!). The sensation of turning the physical page, holding the canvas bound volume makes these actions more comprehensive. Carr stated that the shift from paper to screen doesn't just change the way a piece of writing is navigated, it also influences our degree of attention and the depth of sensory immersion. With the printed page, the writer, it is presumed, has devised a cogent narrative or line of reasoning, the reader working their way through the text or book, with the ability to stop and reflect wherever. When this conference of one has been accomplished, the book remains (in the hands, or on the shelf, always retrievable) for the process to be repeated and extended through a considered trail of logic. Contrary to this, Carr states that online hypertexts, of extensive cross-referencing between related sections of text and graphic material, are the "death" of an author-driven line of reasoning; a major detractor when attempting to read a longer, cohesive text, asserting that research demonstrates people who read linear texts comprehend and remember more, and learn more than those who read a text interrupted by a multitude of links (or advertisements). That online and smartphone texts are not broken down into pages further exacerbates the comprehension quotient, as further studies have shown that a good spatial mental representation of the physical layout of a text leads to better reading comprehension. The length of an online text also affects multiple reading, focus and retention capabilities; Carr states that the average web page holds the reader for eighteen seconds. I recently observed, with great amusement, *The Wall Street Journal* online subtitles its story headings with "2 minute read," "4 minute read," and "long read," etcetera, while the increased reading of "books" on smartphones presents another measure of apprehension.

In opposition to the distinct archival accessibility of the printed word there are conditions where digital discourse's reliance upon electricity (and here we are entering into quite a different realm of debate) for its connectivity and storage becomes art criticism's disturbance, if not disempowerment. As a national example, when political decree and economic expediency ended an aggregate of nearly 120 years of the visual art history of two local arts organizations, to be morphed into one, the subsequent fabrication was left 'holding the baby', of an irreplaceable (hard) archive of cultural material. Subsequent to this artifice both organization's websites did not exist, or elements only arbitrarily so; comprizing much more than sixty issues of *Broadsheet* magazine, fourteen artist monographs and anthologies, and sixty-five exhibition catalogues; of at least 2,500,000 words and nearly 10,000 illustrations. While the hardcopies remain extant, apathy suggests their eventual subservience to whimsy or delinquency.

A final word about ink on paper: nearly twenty years ago the director of a national art museum especially renowned for its collection of Australian art, in the context of exhibiting and acquiring contemporary art, (in)famously asserted that living artists were "difficult" and dead artists were much preferred as they didn't "complain" nor "demand so much." As one of the former at the time (living artist, that is), I suggested in response that "today's visual art is tomorrow's cultural heritage." Correspondingly, today's *ink on paper* focused, expansive cultural critique and analysis is tomorrow's accessible and retrievable archive of national cultural heritage. (Does anybody remember CD-ROMs? Zip disks?) Like taxes, one might be caught against one's will at *some time*, death being even longer. And here is the point: of a situation experienced in the same place as that political decree and economic expediency, in the state of South Australia, its size the combined areas of France and Germany, when the wind blew too hard there wasn't anything electric, the statewide grid collapsing like a chain of dominoes; a complete seizure for up to twenty-four hours. The cynic might respond (and it has been uttered), at least when someone's tripped over the power cord, when your website disappears, you can read this art journal... by candlelight.