

An Open Field

For all artists in the contemporary moment the reconciliation of the drive to make things (a drive which Michael Wegerer strongly manifests through his interests in craft, technology, substitution and translation) has to co-exist with a questioning of context and a self-positioning, which deals with the following questions: Why am I making this and what is the appropriate form?

The world is already full of incredible art, resources are becoming scarcer, art can be expensive to make and difficult to share (though the internet does provide an incredible tool for new kinds of sharing). Even when art becomes an event, a concept or a proposal how these things become active in a wider world still raise questions of intentionality, who is your audience and 'what', as my colleague Yve Lomax would say, 'is at stake'?

So perhaps that question, which can be answered in so many different ways could also be stated as 'what if'? Curiosity, pleasure, a process of asking questions, or telling stories through shaping some form of material is a human drive. In shaping stuff, making models and propositions it is possible to contribute to refiguring the world in a variety of ways.

The issue of whether theory leads practice or practice leads theory is nuanced and the reality for most contemporary artists is that both aspects are ever present. A hostility to theory, as Terry Eagleton once stated, is often simply a hostility to the ideas of others which are different from one's own.

In the print program at the RCA we have students who work from completely contrary positions. There are some for whom a form of 'thinking through making', intense production in the workshops or on a laptop leads to the development of ideas heuristically. A hunch about an image or a set of material or textual translations, a shift of space, of context, create possibilities which are rationalized after the event. For others a text, a proposition, a method is followed through within the construct of self-set conditions which are often not medium specific but can be.

In his book *The Craftsman* Richard Sennet begins with a warning about the fetishization of any craft process:

"The craftsman's desire for quality poses a motivational danger, the obsession with getting things perfectly right may deform the work itself. We are more likely to fail as craftsmen, I argue, due to our inability to organize obsession than because of our lack of ability."¹

What interests me about watching the process of Michael Wegerer's self-questioning is a kind of restlessness in relation to questions of craft being opened up to questions of site, of object and the processes of material translation. As someone who has considerable craft skills, which is what we spoke about on his first visit to the RCA, and a traditional print background, I asked Michael what it is about print and how the matrix serves his thinking;

this is an intense question..! and it's a main question, which interests me since I'm encountered with print. first of all it is my interest to investigate its possibilities of reproduction, the meaning of translation (see Walter Benjamin and George Kubler)

>of memories, traces, marks, history and real facts ...

what interests me is the shift (change) which happens during the processes of transformation >it can be a method to create new sights on things >>

my starting points are facts from reality (the subjects are varying> for personal to cultural issues)

the data (information, memory) can be stored in a kind of matrix (alike a printing plate or a code or an algorithm, a music score, etc...) ...

my attempt by setting up an installation or show is to offer the viewer a possibility to wander through a certain order of the work, to investigate or interact (participate) with the work...

print offers great opportunities to exchange and collaborate as well, i think printmaking >from history till today > includes concepts for a team play and communication ...²

¹Sennett, R. (2008): *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane. p 11

²Wegerer, M.: extract from emails sent to the author

In choosing to write about works I saw produced at different stages of Michael's journey through the RCA, I am acknowledging my own need to only write about things I have actually seen in 'meat world', as some people describe our non-digital material context. I make a distinction between seeing something in the flesh and online and feel unable to fully comment on work I've only encountered as a Jpeg, despite the fact that this is the main form of reception and distribution for all artworks today. I have no luddite attachment to the material per-se but the resonance of work is often hugely influenced by our spatial experience of it. The chance encounter between site and installation is central to much of the work which interests me. This includes screen based, or print work installed in a public space which is fundamentally different from the intimacy of consuming a YouTube video or Jpeg on a phone or tablet. Standing or sitting together to watch work influences how we read it. The scale, materiality, temperature, smell and social function of the situation (gallery, airport, public square etc.) in which we are embedded significantly structure our experience of any work. What interests me about the print context I teach and sometimes make work in, is the fact that it is continually haunted by digital reproduction, even when there is a fascination with the pleasures of material transformation. This is a shared fascination and, as we become ever more reliant on digital tools, a question for us all.

Michael's work *Hockney Chair* was made for an exhibition in a small gallery at the RCA named the Hockney Gallery. The starting point was an ordinary found chair, a thing to be deconstructed and obsessively catalogued in an elaborate process of actual and digital deconstruction. The work brings to mind Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) where a chair, a photograph of a chair and a dictionary definition of the word chair co-exist to question chairness, a work that is almost emblematic of conceptual art and something we had discussed early on. Wegerer's work involved a process of intense labour, slicing the chair into 500 cubical pieces, each numbered, named and then captured in 1400 scans to produce a kind of metadata. The blocks were glued back together and the chair was then dropped from the balcony of the gallery scattering pieces across the floor due to impact. But the pieces disappeared.

...>

the (wooden) chair was lost at the hockney gallery (>after dropping the installation, it was displayed in pieces on the gallery floor, later on all cubes were cleaned up by the cleaning staff) but the chair's cubes were connected and displayed with the print of the scans ... (> it is important to show them together, in order to understand the process and work)

after this part (chair) was lost, i could not display the work anymore, that was in 2010.

in 2013> i finally managed to restore the chair from photocopy paper > cutouts of the scans > and displayed the reconstructed piece, with the prints and the paper sculpture at a group show on furniture in art>i named the new piece "digital hockney chair">³

I asked Michael to remind me of the genesis of the work, as I remembered trying to locate the lost elements in the chain of rubbish collection and distribution. The dispersal of the work back into the world however, in one way seemed fitting, as Michael's interest in digital forms of making and reliance on the scanned data to remake the chair resulted in a new iteration of a process and the paper chair poses more interesting questions in some ways than its wooden source.

The student led cross disciplinary studio *Department 21* which existed for a short time at the RCA provided a framework for collaborative questioning which Michael embraced wholeheartedly. Sharing provisionality and doubt, and thinking about making as a form of conversation was further developed through his participation in this group.

during my engagement at d21 i worked and exchanged with students from other departments and disciplines, which influenced my practice and thinking.-> and i initiated the workshop 'Echo Chambers' together with a writing group and PhD students. >the newsprint 'Harappa' is the document of that evening of writing and drawing at d21 (a project with participative elements) > this news print was printed at the print dep. including images and text fragments of that event⁴

In making a newsprint multiple, produced in the same way as an ordinary newspaper to capture something of the spirit of the collaborative writing workshop, Michael made an artefact which gestures towards the everyday. *Harappa* is a palimpsest containing traces of conversations, images of the spaces used for the workshop and gathered graffiti generated throughout the durational collaborative writing event *Echo Chambers*. With no right way up or clear order of reading, the paper can be folded or displayed as a poster, the form thus echoes the meaning of the word 'Harappa', chosen as the title since in Japanese it is a word for openness in the sense of open field.

³Wegerer ibid

⁴Wegerer ibid

In Black Dust, the work made for Michael's final show at the RCA, was a large paper structure installed in the center of the sculpture studio, both blocking and framing surrounding work. Since the work was huge and had to be made in a smallish studio space Michael himself did not see it until it was assembled.

The work is a full scale replica of a gate at Dungeness, the nuclear power station in Kent, which Michael had visited and describes thus;

*the attempt to produce X-Ray like screen-prints to resolve the paper's translucency and the marks of the structures tracing captures the process of making and (un)folds in the folded paper sculpture. because of the lack of working space i was working blind during the process of construction and was driven to investigate avisibility and atomic light. everything was rolled up and i needed to imagine fragments as particles of the whole structure.*⁵

The fragile nature of paper and the technical data visible in the work positions it as a model or blueprint. Such specific references made it apparent that a link to an elsewhere (real or imagined) was probably to be sought and postcards of the power-station were lying on the floor nearby. An unattached gate is an absurd object, pointless since its defining role as a barrier is absent. Like Rose Finn-Kelcey's Pearly Gate (1997) or Tommy Cooper's stage prop gate *In Black Dust* is a conundrum. In leaving visible the notes for reassembly and asking the viewer to imagine the processes of construction, the diagrammatic nature of the work comes to the fore.

The use of non-expressive visual codes in art (in contrast to gestural self-expression as a guiding myth) ties in with my fascination for diagrams. A quote by the mathematician Gilles Châtelet "diagrams are gestures that invite other gestures"⁶ framed a recent conference on the diagram at the ICA in London .It opens up the realm of the diagram as a kind of collaboratively evolving set of forms and relations. This clarifies that what interests me about these forms is that they belong to no one but are commonly recognized and invite reading. We can make maps as well as follow them, our individual journeys can be traced within the frameworks of a common language.

Richard Sennet ends *The Craftsman* with a question, asking what *the craft of experience* might imply. He goes on to suggest that

"we would focus on form and procedure - that is on techniques of experience. These could guide us even in encounters that happen only once by furnishing an envelope of tacit knowledge for our actions. We would want to shape the impress people and events had made on us so that these impressions are intelligible to others who do not know the same people we know or lived through the same events.

... we would try to make the particular knowledge we possess transparent in order that others can understand and respond to it."⁷

The whole book is fraught with examples of the difficulties of making anything transparent, especially that which is experiential and tacit, and makes clear the role of ambiguity and play in searching out an elusive 'craft of experience'. In thinking through these examples of Michael's work, I realize that his invitation to write was an invitation to revisit many conversations, often involving mistranslations and misunderstandings but always generative. The works he presents demand a kind of piecing together and an acceptance of incompleteness and fragility. Exhibiting causes a temporary pause before it is all thrown up in the air (or dashed to the ground) and we wait to see where the pieces will land.

Jo Stockham, February 2016

⁵ Wegerer ibid

⁶ *Plague of Diagrams*, Symposium at the ICA London, 22.08.2015

⁷ Sennet ibid p 289