

A Means of Exchange

Introduction

Below another sky is the first collaborative programme developed by the Scottish Print Network, a partnership between Dundee Contemporary Arts, Edinburgh Printmakers, Glasgow Print Studio, Highland Print Studio, Inverness and Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen. *Below another sky* takes its name from the poem 'Travel', published in 1865 by the Edinburgh-born author Robert Louis Stevenson. Travel – both actual and imaginary – was central to Stevenson's work.

10 artists from Scotland and 10 from Commonwealth countries were invited to undertake research residencies during 2013 and 2014. Artists from Scotland travelled to Antigua, Baffin Bay, Bangladesh, Canada, India, New Zealand and Zambia; artists from Australia, Canada, India and Pakistan were on residency in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness.

Each artist worked with one of the five print studios on the development of ambitious and innovative new work in print.

A Means of Exchange documents four of these residencies from a printer's point of view.

The printer's voice is rarely heard outside the studio, even though it is the exchange between artist and printer that gives meaning and existence to the new work. This exchange begins with words: conversations around matching medium to concept and discussions of processes that might nurture emerging ideas. These lead to mark-making, demonstrations and sample books that the printer has amassed and sketches or collections of ideas that the artist brings. It is an exercise in verbal, visual and process-specific dialogue, and learning each other's language.

The benefit of having an artist present in the studio for longer than a day or two cannot be underestimated, so that the whole concept of residency was vital to the success of this project. Proofs can be made, adjusted, abandoned or reworked in a continuing interchange between the media and the makers. The result is a true collaboration, and many artists find it replenishing to have this experience, when much of their practice is in isolation. On the other hand the printer's practice is enriched by the exercise of their problem-solving skills and in the experience of being in another artist's confidence. (It goes without saying that the best collaborative printers are also artists.) This alchemy could not be further from the image that is sometimes envisaged by those outside the process, where it may be assumed that an artist hands over work completed in another medium; painted, drawn, photographed or digitally created for the printer mechanically to copy.

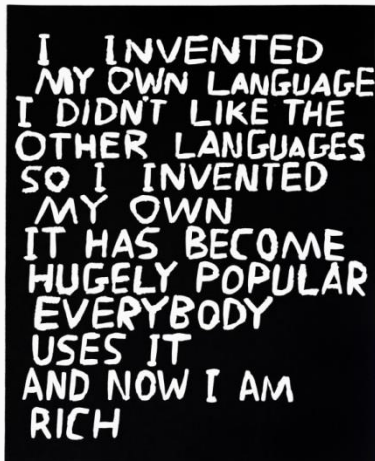
The printed image has preceded and accompanied printed text for centuries. It is a connective tissue between disparate cultural and academic disciplines. From each of these it accrues an aura of associations and to each it lends a visual distinctiveness. With this mass of historical and sociological accretions each print-process evokes, references and amplifies meaning beyond the text. The selection by an artist of a particular process cannot therefore be seen as an accidental or unconsidered factor in the production of a printed art work. No artist comes to print completely naively, even if they have no experience of actually making a print, it is impossible to grow up in today's world without absorbing at least an intuitive feel for the language of print and the references embedded in it, and contemporary artists approach these with the same critical viewpoints that they do other media. Artists and printers are equally concerned that prints will reflect and be subject to the full range of contemporary art discourse. It is no longer sufficient for the word 'traditional' to be sole justification for process, every mark made is required to answer for itself.

Too often, commentators on art find it acceptable to be uninformed about the specifics of print media, or even, on occasion, the difference between print and painting. I propose that history shows that in the most important printed works, the medium may not be the message, but it may well be the means of effectively conveying the message so that some understanding of the 'how' of it is therefore crucial to criticism .

Artists perpetually return to the vital medium of print, precisely because it is all pervasive in, and indeed makes possible, contemporary culture. As mediators between the community and the worlds of science, literature, industry and politics, artists have wanted to use the media of those disciplines directly to comment on and give visual meaning to them.

As repository and guide to this history the printer has a particular viewpoint of printed works and this paper aims to explore and share that. Every printed mark owes its existence to several centuries of printing history and the wildly diverse media that have existed. Unpicking those threads can throw unexpected lights on what may at first appear to be simple prints, and lead through unlikely histories, where wildly disparate elements from revolutionary songwriting to sheep farming may play a part.

A Means of Exchange



Substitute the word *currency* for *language* (terms which are, after all, to some extent interchangeable) in the text of David Shrigley's print, and one could propose a sub-text. A few years ago it would have seemed impossible that the creation of a new coinage by an individual or small group could become a preferred option to the established world monetary system. And yet bitcoin and its derivatives are coming close to doing just that. Headlines announce that they are dangerously undermining the stability of existing world finance and the debt based economy.¹

David Shrigley. *Untitled* Linocut, 2014

Shrigley's text piece was at press at a time when the issue of currency was a matter of urgent debate in Scotland, due to the referendum on Independence, with questions arising over the ownership of

¹ Bitcoin was never intended to be the one cryptocurrency to rule them all, because anyone can make their own version of it. The code which underpins the currency is released under what's known as an open-source licence. Anyone can use it themselves, and alter any aspect they want, in order to create a whole new currency.

A whole class of alternative crypto-currencies, based on the fundamental aspects of bitcoin, have been created over the past couple of years. The first and biggest of the "altcoins", called Litecoin, was created in 2011 to address some perceived flaws in the Bitcoin protocol.

currency; Can England prevent Scotland from using Sterling? – and what a currency constitutes; Would a new Scottish currency be legal?; Could it be called a Pound?.

Many visitors already find the colourful and diverse range of banknotes in Scotland as remarkable as the variety of accents, dialects and unique words, with Scotland having three banks licensed to print money. It might just be possible to surreptitiously float a new design before it was noticed.

Bank notes are prints, limited editions even, and the printing of money carries its own burden of abstraction. A government or nation once depended on having a 'licence to print money' and the means to defend and impose it, where previously they had to show actual metal. The mental leap to accepting a printed piece of paper, however elaborate the process used, as a valid exchange was once considered the mark of civilisation. Nowadays even the print is virtual, as is the 'new' language of quantitative easing.

In fact Scotland invented the banknote as currency, that is, printed in set denominations, and the history of the banknote is tied in with Scotland's history in both Independence and Union. The Bank of Scotland was founded when Scotland was still an independent nation and unlike the Bank of England it was established to provide credit for commerce, not to fund a king and his wars. It was however one of the earliest instances of a bank printing money to plug a hole in national debt.

The promissory note was first known to be in use in sixth-century China, and was common in medieval Europe, but the Bank of Scotland was the first to introduce, in 1696, a nationally accepted paper print in lieu of gold or silver.² Opting, for ease of trade with England, to issue them in pounds Sterling (rather than the Scots Pound) was not therefore a consequence of the Act of Union, but did prove to be a financial benefit credited with the enormous rise in prosperity of Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Edinburgh became a world centre of banknote production.

Currencies, like languages, are social constructs that enshrine and depict national identity, mythology and history and are often inextricably interlinked. Both depend on gaining a critical number of users before they can function. Both languages and currencies are clung to like life-rafts and better protected than many endangered species. (*Deutschmark, Pound, Franc, Dollar, Gaelic, Welsh, Breton, Catalan, Maori.*) Along with his other campaigns for Scottish language and identity (as he perceived it) Sir Walter Scott is famous for saving the Bank of Scotland one pound note and consequently appears on their banknotes to this day.

Once upon a time the staple of world trade was wool, and empires were made and lost on the back of sheep. Wool joined the list of unlikely game-changers in the language of global commerce – nutmeg, pepper, tulip, porcelain, tea, opium - and the Highlands of Scotland were cleared of human communities to be loaded up with sheep. Many of the cleared, if they survived, travelled to the antipodes and eventually became highly successful sheep-farmers (clearing the land of Maori and Aborigine to make room for the flocks). Within a generation they were putting the British (Scottish) wool barons out of business.

So alternatives had to be found for the dominance of the fleece as gold standard in Europe, and several languages and currencies on both sides of the earth were oppressed to extinction along with their creators.

² That very first note was printed on a "taille-douce," a rolling press invented in the 1540s, which forced dampened paper into lines engraved in copper plates, and identical to those we use today.

In more recent years it is art itself that has joined the list of economic drivers, with intrinsically valueless materials being turned to gold by the hand of the artist, and the record-breaking competition between collector-investors.

For the Below Another Sky Project, Shrigley travelled to New Zealand (incidentally the country with the highest number of sheep per unit area in the world, with 10 sheep for every human, although now the bottom has dropped out of the market, with the new currency of synthetics in ascendance). Shrigley did not go there (as far as I know) to study the economics of sheep farming. His interest was more personal or even internal, exploring the process of travel in developing new writing, and his ideas in typography and print.

The initial motive for print was communication and accessibility. Before printing enabled multiple copies of books to be made, texts were laboriously copied by hand, and images were rare and precious things. It also made it easier for the literate elite to retain control through language, and one of the main drivers for the development of printing in Europe was the desire to disseminate vernacular bibles.

WM Ivins (Prints and Visual Communication) argued that due to illiteracy and diversity of language, the pictorial reproduction of the image through printing was far and away more revolutionary and important to communication in every field than that of text. Furthermore, it was only when true mass-production, with the invention of automated type-casting, came in the later nineteenth century that the printed book became affordable to more than a tiny minority. Until then the block-printed image was the main means of education and dissemination.



Pharmacopeia, Rome 1483

Woodcut was the first technique to create and circulate many copies of images and/or texts. In Europe, from early in the fourteenth century, woodcuts were crude, simply-made and hand-printed. The white areas of an image were gouged out of a flat piece of wood with basic tools. In poorer communities world-wide this is still the social networking medium of first resource. A lively print trade exists in South American and African communities where images and texts are hand-printed from knife-cut reclaimed woodblocks, plastics, or similar material, disseminating everything from revolution to gossip.



J Borges, cut block and Jota Barros print.



'The woman who tore her pillow and bit her husband dreaming of Roberto Carlos'. Poem by Apolônio Alves dos Santos. Woodcut by Jota Barros.

As well as establishing currencies and enabling capitalism, empowering governments and procuring obedience, the printing of text fixed language at the point of going to press. Where verbal language evolution had been promiscuous and profligate, widely available standard texts set more inflexible grammars. Casting of (stereo)type gave us the principle of mass-production and standardisation, and the sound of ink being rolled gave us the 'cliché'.

Overleaf, printing was used to foment revolution through broadsheets, pamphlets and sheet music. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries mobile broadsheet presses in Fleet Street were raided regularly. In revolutionary France inking by roller was illegal as it meant secret printing could be undertaken (as opposed to the giveaway pounding of inkpads).

A by-product of printing technology was the committal of dying and oppressed languages to print. This meant they could at least be preserved in captivity, even though this was often not the intention of the publishers, who usually printed bibles and government treaties in native tongues only as instruments of empire. By chance though, a few of the tongues of Babel were preserved.

Typefaces and fonts, from their early basis on hand-scripture, evolved to embody what has been called a 'graphic unconscious'; each one subliminally arousing associations with the epoch and ethos of their devising. This form of inherited pattern recognition allows people to recognise a raft of cultural and historical associations in nearly all typefaces, even if they are in different languages. The invention of a successful typeface that could function in letterpress process and remain legible, as well as fitting its purpose, from product promotion to imperial authority, was a substantial skill.



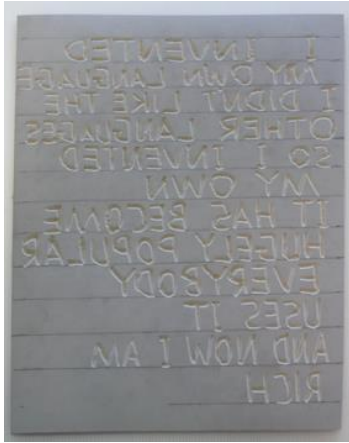
Whilst researching for *Below another sky*, Shrigley also devised a hand-cut typeface, which we used to make a large-format unique print.



It was important to Shrigley that the freehand letters he had arrived at in his design process should be cut by hand and retain irregularities of drawing or cutting. He also gave them a human hand-scale of around 12 cm high. He rejected any technological intervention that might impose its own mechanical tidiness. We could have used laser-cutters or digital routers to make the type-blocks, but for the artist's insistence on the hand-made. This reliance on his own hand is a hallmark of Shrigley's. He has carved a career by not adopting received wisdom and practice but by making his own mark. He discovered as a student that the 'worse' he drew by academic standards, the more effective and popular his work became.

The resulting print is 2.4 by 1.5 metres on heavyweight paper, thus completely oversized for any apparent function. Set out as a letter, it appears to be a direct communication between artist and viewer, but is far too big to be sent by mail, or to work on an intimate basis. It refers to 'this artwork', without specifying what the artwork is. Pinned unframed next to the framed edition, like an enormous Brechtian label, seems to turn the edition into 'this artwork', but if it were hung next to another artefact that might then equally become 'this artwork'. Or is the text the artwork itself, in a self-referencing loop? The cut letters at the time of printing are all free-standing and can be rearranged at will into a new text, with a new meaning. This is the opposite of the linocut edition which would have to be completely recut to change the text. The interplay between the two kinds of printing, (the pictorial woodblock, and the moveable-type letterpress) is highlighted by the contradictions, where the product of the 'moveable type' is the opposite of either mobility or ephemerality, and exists as a unique work.

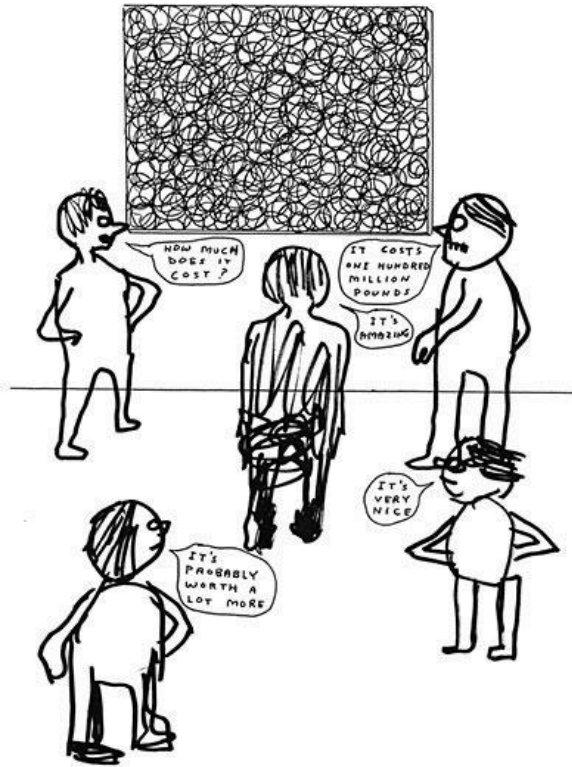
TH Barrett, in *The Woman who discovered Printing* describes how in China, printed text was initially made by the page-per-block system, rather than with movable type, as early as the seventh century, and discusses how this arose from the differences of pictographic and alphabetic writing. With these two works Shrigley has playfully blurred the origins of printed text and image, using alphabetic text pictorially. The direction of the unique work forces the viewer to stand outside the narrative to question what is the artwork, what is the legend and what is language itself?



For the edition, in a similar process to the street artist of Brazil or Mali, Shrigley used a simple gouge to carve his text on to a piece of lino, a humble floor-covering material with strong manufacturing connections to the East Coast of Scotland and formed from the locally important substances of jute, linseed and whale oil. He worked directly and in mirror-writing, so that on printing the text is reversed to read correctly. This print in its very material inherits a language of dissent and subversion, with anti-graphics, anti-process, autographic accents, and traces of Dada, Letterism and Punk. The block is only really possible to ink with the clandestine roller, due to the large flat areas. It is printed on our nineteenth-century relief press, identical to those used in broadsheet and banknote production. The edition of 100 is relatively large so nods towards the democratic and the aura of broad distribution, whilst its hand-made quality and the hand-mark of the artist is retained to confer authenticity and value. Significantly, however, he chose to cut the letters as voids. This makes the print even more direct, as he is able to cut a stroke with one cut, whereas in the fifteenth century and Brazilian examples shown above, the block is cut away to leave the images / letters raised, in a process more akin to carving than writing or drawing. The appearance of text as impressed or inscribed is evocative of early writing developments, such as cuneiform, where the lettering is pressed into clay tablets, or chisel-cut as on ancient artefacts – the prime example being the Rosetta stone. The expression ‘carved in stone’ itself carries associations of permanence, history and finality lending significance to the slightest graffiti. The final print has the hallmarks of the hand-made and ephemeral and at first glance it may seem incongruous that this text, with its lightness and deftness, should evoke such a monumental comparison, however it could also stand (one day) as an epitaph, or legend.



The term *Rosetta stone* is used idiomatically to represent a crucial key to the process of decryption of encoded information, especially when a small but representative sample is recognized as the clue to understanding a larger whole. (OED 1989)



Similarly in this one print for the BAS project, which might at first seem slight, the artist's particular manner of use of the medium itself, in addition to the actual text, may give clues to understanding Shrigley's work as a whole. An artist who has frequently used his brilliance in gentle mockery of the art world, and who has become one of the most successful artists of his generation, has done so by inventing his own very personal language and sticking with it, despite early attempts to impose established languages upon him.

The presentation of text as visual object is in itself challenging to the preconceptions of viewers, being neither entirely abstract nor representational. It is narrative but not descriptive, nor instructional. (One has only to imagine how the same text, presented in a mechanically produced typeface such as Times Roman and traditionally justified, would send a completely different message.) It avoids nostalgic references and has the directness of abstraction but divides the viewer's attention between the reading of the text's meaning and the visual appearance, being presented as a 'picture' in frame. The text is neither polemic nor declarative, it tells a story but does not offer interpretation. It could be that we are being offered a utopian aspiration – that individual creativity can triumph over hegemony, or a Letterist criticism of the hyper-commercialisation of creative activity. As reader in the Barthesian tradition, the viewer is called on to co-create the text without reference to the artist's context. Perhaps we really need the oversized label, and the artist invoking us to simply 'enjoy the artwork'.