

PressRelease

A New System Every Monday (2013)

Morphology of the Print, Lehman College Gallery, Bronx, NY

24' tall x 12' wide: Each panel 3'x2'

Mixed Print Media: Woodblock, Lithography, Monotype, Collagraph, Intaglio, and Digital Chine-Colle paper stretched over board.

Installation art should not just decorate a space; it should make visible that space. Lehman College's Fine Arts Building, designed by mid-century master, Marcel Breuer, carries the signature style of the architect, who was famed for his blocky, poured concrete designs. In response to critics who accused him of recycling the same design aesthetic, he replied: "I can't design a whole newsystem every Monday morning." The print sculpture/installation created for this show, a 24' tall by 12' wide triangle built from a standard 2'x3' grid of prints—borrows its title, *A New System Every Monday*, from Breuer's defensive lamentation. The system is familiar, 'the grid:' filling the grid is the 'printed image.' Everyday we see the printed image and the standardized grid threatening to subsume all things. However, the grid and the image are still forced to conform to the human built environment, human institutions, and human social spaces. *A New System Every Monday* shows the image grid conforming to the idiosyncrasies of a poured concrete building with a pitched roof and uneven floor in a room where an exterior glass façade is covered with a white gallery wall to make the space safe for art.

PressRelease

Marginal Utility Sept-Oct 2013

Marginal Utility is proud to present **WOODCUT MAP OF UTOPIA FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2013 EDITION**, a solo exhibition by the New York based artist Rob Swainston.

The show explores the interface between political and institutional structures, historical memory and print technology by exposing the "unstable image" in moments of visual interference—moiré, bitmap, collage, and line.

The exhibition draws its title from an illustration heading in a mass-market edition of Renaissance humanist Thomas More's *Utopia*, picked up for free at New Harmony Vegetarian in Philly's Chinatown, several years ago.

The illustration, Woodcut Map of Utopia From the March 1518 edition, is now out-of-copyright and displayed in cheap reproduction on self-destructing paper. This mass-market paperback is a shadow of a reminder that once people could write a book describing an idealized society via a fictionalized conversation between two people that did actually exist.

While print technologies were once cutting-edge methods of disseminating representations (maps, fine art reproductions), or political machination (treatises, manifestos, proclamations, or representations of historical events), we now have the fragmented and democratized pixel.

Swainston's Woodcut Map addresses the dismantling of the printed image. The theme is explored in multiple forms in which different print media masquerade as each other; the line between print, video and painting is blurred; cast iron poses as wood; and a deconstruction of Léon Frédéric's Four Seasons is translated as an inscrutable color explosion, matching our current state of "global weirding," to Frédéric's 1894 Academic idealism.

Swainston's recent work employs print-based installation, video, and works on paper to explore print technology, the meaning of the image and ultimately the fragmentation and disappearance of the image.

Press Release

Below Orion's Belt

FAWC's Hudson D. Walker Gallery, Provincetown, MA

January-February 2012

In the Provincetown night sky, somewhere **Below Orion's Belt**, is Wall of Noise Nebula and its mixed print media Star Cluster Orchestra. Join artist and **Fine Arts Work Center** Fellow **Rob Swainston** for a journey in spaceship **Hudson D Walker Gallery** to visit Wall of Noise Nebula, a 20x17 foot woodblock print/soundstage/lightshow/video. Misbehaving actors attempt to tear down Wall of Noise, but the video cannot touch the impermeable topography of the printed image. Guy Debord tells us the spectacle perfected is power consolidated as pure image. If Wall of Noise is Debord's Spectacle Capitalism, then its Star Cluster Orchestra is Naomi Klein's Disaster Capitalism; master printer is replaced by disaster printer. Master printers are technocrats, proto-machines and image-smiths in the Spectacle-Image order. Star Cluster Orchestra posits a new printmaker, the disaster printer, with a series of mixed experimental woodblock, lithography, silkscreen, intaglio, collagraph, monotype, digital, and offset prints produced at FAWC's recently hopped-up and fine tuned **Michael Mazur Print Studio**. The disaster printer resists

instrumentalization and recuperation. He/she does not say 'this is image', rather they ask 'what is the significant image.'

PressRelease

PLEXUS (2011)

Esther Massry Gallery, College of St. Rose, Albany, NY

Printmaking processes—woodcut, etching, silkscreen, lithography, along with photography and digital printing—are both artistic and social mediums. While artistic concerns are aesthetic, formal, and material, the social relate to image production, image propagation, image use, and image meaning. The technical innovations of the printshop parallel the rise of mass culture, mass media, visual display and ordering of knowledge within our visually saturated society.

A Plexus describes a dense convergence of networks, an intersection place, and a conduit of multiplicities. While all the parts of a plexus are linked, a plexus does not synthesize, order, or homogenize its components. This show—PLEXUS—is comprised of five parts: Propositions, Mirrors, Machines, Mountain, and Cascade. While all the parts are linked, each component of the Plexus has a different set of attractors at work; attractors that germinate order, pattern, structure, and sense out of what otherwise would appear to be a chaotic mishmash of dissociated and reassembled imagery.

Propositions feature the most heterogeneous set of attractors. These mixed-media collages merge numerous processes, imagery, and materials into a uniform 24"x32"x1" 'proposition box.' Drawing from both Rauschenberg's Combines and Deleuzian architectural theory, the Propositions emerge from an exploratory process of mixing, matching, printing, and overprinting to generate new visual components. These are re-sampled and recontextualized into existing compositions. The process is a constant mediation, recycling, and cannibalization of printed imagery as a means to address use, repetition, manipulations, and ultimately the dissolution of the social image. Mirrors, installations on the ceiling viewed through mirrors on the floor, share both bordering and layering attractors with Propositions.

Machines are simple-to-complex rule based systems. These Machines—10'x15.5' and 10'x18.5' woodblock prints—follow two interrelated trajectories; one a technological history of advances in image representation, and the other a social history following the pseudo-historical notion of 'Course of Empire' originating in 19th century American popular history. This social narrative—from nature to mechanization, standardization, spectacle-consummation, and recombination—is performed through woodblock relief printing. The progression of images—from woodgrain, to linear black and white, to multilayered color separation—traces the evolution of relief

printing technology but remains decipherable as "a woodblock." Cascade, three 24 footlong ceiling to floor scrolls, demonstrate that the same information blocks used in Machines can be recoded to fit another narrative.

Mountain, a performance video presented on a small monitor coupled with one drawing, mimics a calm domestic environment. However, the presentation is in tension with the performance, in which the artist attempts to intervene with a hyper-mediated landscape by drawing with rolls of paper on the side of a hill.

PRESS RELEASE

Smack Mellon

Site 92

In Front of Behind the Wall

2010

Woodblock print on paper

Three site-specific 42" x 24' scrolls installed ceiling to floor
In Front of Behind the Wall is a site-specific print installation Swainston made for Site 92. Three long scrolls uncover the material underpinning of the building by revealing the brick wall and columns that have been mostly obscured by the white walls requisite for "gallery space." The scrolls begin by revealing brick columns, then cascade into a chaotic unraveling. The cascades follow the column, but the structural pattern degenerates into an abstract socio-architectural machination.

PRESS RELEASE

DAVID KRUT PROJECTS

"ROB SWAINSTON--PROPOSITIONS"
September 7-October 16 2010

David Krut Projects is delighted to present *Propositions*, a solo show by New York based artist, Rob Swainston. In this new series of 38 mixed-media works, Rob Swainston merges traditional printmaking processes—such as lithography, woodcut, and silkscreen—with digital photography and printing to create a torrent of visual information and energy, all compressed into

uniform 24" x 32" x 1" boxes.

Initiated as an open-ended project in 2008, Swainston's proposition boxes were first limited by a defined paper size (22" x 30") and the material recycling of previous large-scale print-based installations. Inspired by Rauschenberg's "combines" and Deleuzian architectural theory, Swainston's exploratory process of mixing, matching, printing, and overprinting generated new visual components, which were re-sampled and re-contextualized into existing compositions. Central to the artist's working process is the constant mediation, recycling, and cannibalization of his own printed imagery and ideas as a means to address the use, repetition, manipulation, and ultimate dissolution of the social image.

Swainston finds printmaking uniquely situated to address the ways in which historical, political, and cultural factors contribute to how we experience and understand images in our society. In its ability to disseminate information quickly and cheaply, the printed image—historically understood to be the most democratic medium—not only threatens the impact of other mediums, but also, according to Swainston, "has the power to subsume all forms of knowledge and discourse."

Mimicking biological and social processes in which the urgency of recombination is a matter of survival, Swainston's Propositions investigates the simultaneous desire to rebuild and destroy. Like organisms or institutions, these "recombinant" visual systems are forced to reconcile with the unexpected consequences of their past in order to come to terms with their present identity.

PRESS RELEASE

BRAVIN LEE Programs

Centennial Drift

Centennial Drift

February 5 - March 13, 2010

Rob Swainston mixes installation, printmaking, sculpture, drawing and video in an exploration of social and historical processes. Because Swainston works large and in multiples he can cut up, overprint, combine, repeat and reassemble work in multiple ways. He is constantly rebuilding and reassembling work while adding new components and destroying old. For him, this process is analogous to how our social world is constructed.

Centennial Drift is an exploration of contemporary American political and social landscape 100 years after the 'closing of the American frontier.' The show consists of two components: a large woodblock Centennial and a video/print juxtaposition, Till Tomorrow On. When the American Western Frontier was declared 'closed' a century ago, the event was greeted with a certain unease among historians and political actors, stemming from a perception that the frontier served an important distraction from the

political machinations of real power relations. Adrift in the 'American Century' that followed, the frontier has been replaced variously by global empire, mass media, consumerism, the cold war, the space race, the space age, and, more recently globalization and the digital frontier.

Centennial, a large woodblock print mural spanning three walls in the main gallery is a black and white print, derived from a jigsaw block of distressed, cut and reassembled plywood printed on heavy watercolor paper. It acts as a vacant stage that once possessed the expansive hope of the American frontier and now has been reduced to an empty wall—a 'post-landscape landscape', at once evoking historiography, topography and cosmology.

The video/print installation, Till Tomorrow On, reveals the nature of the spectacle of political machinations, and the robust reproduction of power structures. The departure point for Till Tomorrow On is a large 16th century multi-woodblock print by Albrecht Durer, Triumphal Arch. The original print featured interchangeable panels in an architectural armature. The panels, functioning as propaganda, could be removed, replaced, or relocated depending upon political necessity and imperial whim. Swainston has redrawn, reconfigured, and updated Triumphal Arch positioned within the context of American Spectacle.

TEXT

Questions and Answers

Questions: Genevieve Lowe and Hannah Dumes of David Krut Projects

Answers: Rob Swainston

August 2010

1) In what ways do traditional printmaking history and processes intersect with your interest in modern technology, mass media, propaganda and dissemination of information?

The 'traditional' print processes (woodcut, etching, lithography, etc.) were all once cutting edge technologies. The history of printmaking is both a history of technical innovations and a social history. The technical innovations that emerge from the print shop continue today with photography, video, and digital imaging. The social history; the rise of the mass media, the emergence of our visually saturated society, propaganda machines, the dissemination and 'look' of information, and of the visual display of knowledge along with its ordering is also a history of

printmaking. My interest with the social side of this story originally attracted me to print media. My investigation started with the older technologies but lead to contemporary print technologies. Because of all the linkages, I do not separate them; and because these linkages also connect with the social, print media is well situated to tackle issues of the image, of propaganda, mass media, and the politics of representation. But there is another set of linkages at play here that connects with art history and artistic practices.

2) Please discuss the performative nature and feverish energy of your working process. There seems to be a balance/tension between spontaneous actions and calculated decisions.

I consider joy and desire among the few remaining effective and relatively untainted tools artist have at their disposal to positively impact society. These 'propositions' are records of performances in which desire and joy are major components. They are 'fun' and I assert this is political. There is also an artistic strategy at work here—fast and slow. The fast is the spontaneous, the urgent, and the feverish energy. The slow is calculated, meticulous and planned. The tension arises from the intentionally mixing of these actions. For example, I will perform a very spontaneous act—an urgent brush stroke over a projected line. I will then force this mark through the tedious translation process of hand carving the mark into a woodblock print. Along the way I can pick up speed again; by photographing and using the work in progress or by printing multiple copies that can be torn up and reassembled into collage or installation. The printmaking matrix is fruitful territory to mine with this strategy as there are so many ways to move around and manipulate an image between the various processes.

3) These "propositions" feel like micro-burst storms - how do they relate to larger ideas/concepts in your oeuvre?

At the first level these pieces are studies for larger installation work. They are also 'micro-burst storms' because they compress all the energy and intensity of a larger installation piece into a 24x32x1" box. However, the relationship between the small and larger pieces is much more complex than this. The larger pieces work as a system of generating detritus; the failed parts, the off-cuts, the photodocuments. These then get plugged into another system—the 'proposition box.' This 'proposition box' came out of an ongoing and very open-ended mixed media collage project. A few years ago I gathered parts of previous projects—mostly woodblocks and silkscreens—and cut (or standardized) everything down to 18x24" on 22x30" paper. I then began an exploratory process of printing and overprinting, and of mixing and matching. Once the project gained momentum I followed its many leads and began to import new work—new blocks, lithos, screens, drawing, photo-mechanical, digital and collage elements. This began to feed back into the larger installation work. At some point earlier this year the entire system of large and small work reached a critical mass (or a sort of phase-transition). I was reading Deluzian

inspired architectural theory and I saw the larger possibility of paper as a topography. At this point all sorts of new interesting possibilities entered the mix; some formal, material, architectural and design driven; others about image, duplication, repetition, sampling, and editing; and still more about emergence, emergent properties, and emergent systems.

4) Can you elaborate on the mediation of process, recycling of imagery, cannibalization of past projects as part of developing new ideas and imagery?

This strategy—to continue to work and rework pieces, to mine oneself, to recycle and cannibalize, to constantly rebuild and reassemble while adding new and destroying old—this strategy is at the core of my practice. I have come to call it 'recombinant,' or 'recombinations.' In some ways it is related to Rauschenberg's combines. The similarity with Rauschenberg is with importing 'outside' influences and with the collapsing of painting and sculpture. However, the differences are important; the main practical difference is the constant recycling and self-cannibalization. The major conceptual difference is that I am consciously mimicking a social and even biological process. A recombinant system, or institution, or organism, or piece of art is forced to deal with, to reconcile, and to reconsider fragments of its own past or itself in the face of new inputs. The urgency of recombination is the urgency of survival. It is never possible to rebuild according to 'plan', or in an 'orderly' or 'prescribed' way. New inputs always need to be reconciled with unexpected historical/biological contingencies/consequences. In short there is no 'clean slate,' 'empty canvas,' or 'new man.' Some of this process intersects with situationist strategies of détournement. In a way, the 'art' becomes choosing what is significant out of this system, of 'data mining' and of editing.

5) How do you contextualize your work within both art history and contemporary art?

The contemporary field of art is much more heterogeneous than it has ever been. This heterogeneity comes after a period in which the dominant artists and critics attempted to strangle the definition of art to fit a narrow conception of its proper course. However, this fictional center could not hold. As I see it, my generation is more concerned with political, sociological, and reflexive issues, rather than defending some meta-history about the trajectory of art. The title of this show—Propositions—was used by Joseph Kosuth in 'Art After Philosophy' to demonstrate what was and what was not art. He claimed a work of art 'is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art.' He described two kinds of propositions, the analytic and the synthetic. An analytic proposition gains validity because it references only the symbols it contains within itself. The synthetic proposition draws from a larger range of experiences. Though for Kosuth, the synthetic was not art, my 'Propositions' contain both the synthetic and the analytic. At stake is the social image; the use of the image, repetition of the image, context of the image, manipulation of the image, sampling of the image, ubiquity of the image and ultimately, the

fragmentation and disappearance of the image. Printmaking is uniquely situated to deal with these issues precisely because it threatens to subsume all other mediums. The analogous situation with the social world is that the image threatens to subsume all knowledge and discourse (with the help of the print).

Questions and Answers

Questions: Jamie Berger of Cranky Pressman for forthcoming PUSH/Print book

Answers: Rob Swainston

July 2011

1) Describe your work.

My work crosses from print and paper media into installation, sculpture, and video. I cut up, overprint, repeat, and reassemble prints in multiple ways. I am constantly rebuilding and reassembling my work while adding new components and destroying old. For me, this process is analogous to how our social world is constructed. Scale and a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk* is important, but I am learning that sometimes scale works better when it is smaller and compressed, as with my recent Propositions series.

2) Early influences.

I've always had two sets of interests; one social-history, sociology, politics—and the other the visual arts. As an undergrad at Hampshire College a key social science professor of mine, Lester Mazor (who recently passed away), influenced me enormously. He worked for social justice. I learned from him how to be autonomous, to surround yourself with a like-minded people in a like minded community, and to make decisions that would enable you to see an open door and walk through it. This is how I became an artist.

3) How did you get into printmaking?

As an undergrad I followed the social science track over the visual arts. When I moved to New York City I realized I needed an arts education and took many art classes all over the city. A drawing teacher told me that I 'think like a printmaker.' The second printmaking class I took was a woodblock class at Columbia University with Gregory Amenoff. A few weeks into the class I was working late night and ran out of wood. I pillaged the kitchen shelves and kept working.

4) What responses do you get to your work?

My work appeals to a broad spectrum of people on multiple levels of engagement—both experiential and intellectual. People who have not been socialized into the dominant discourses surrounding contemporary art have no problem entering the work. At the same time there are also numerous access points for people who are 'in' the art world.

5) How has your technique developed?

It is possible to generate content—that elusive and very important 'conceptual'—while you are 'making.' I have learned to be hyper-observant of every aspect of what I am working on, especially on those things that appear to lie just outside the realm of the project.

6) What does printmaking mean to you?

The history of printmaking follows two interrelated trajectories. One is a history of technical innovations—from the cave handprint to the woodblock up through the current digital technologies. This also includes photography and the moving image. The printed image is also a social technology; a technology of control and order, a discourse—the spectacle is image. Knowledge has moved away from oral and written traditions toward a visual understanding of the world. Printmaking is uniquely situated to address the ways in which historical, political, and cultural factors contribute to how we experience images in our society. Today this looks like the collapse of meaning around image.

7) Walk me through a day in your studio.

There really is no 'typical day'—my work rhythms are different. I've never been a 9-5 artist. The work I do takes a lot of time, and a certain amount of frantic obsession is built into the content. If I let myself go I will spend days, weeks, and then months working on one thing. This kind of practice is neither sustainable nor good for the work. So a good day is spent managing my obsessions; some work for myself, some for other people, read a book, ride a bike, make a round of the galleries. I'm also a night person. I really get started at about 11.30pm and work till 5am. I like to fall asleep in the studio, in front of the work, so it's the first thing I see when I wake up.

8) How has your subject matter evolved?

I am following the leads of my own content, and evolution is in the nature

of that content—I call this 'recombinant recombinations.' One interesting shift that has happened is the material and the formal have entered into the work in ways I once resisted. It may seem a little contradictory, but my trying to get a grasp on the image and on the contemporary status of 'viewing art' has made me pay more attention to the materials I am using (paper, print, wood, etc,) and their shifting meanings.

9) What inspires you these days?

(Un)Fortunately my work could almost act as a perpetual-motion-self-inspirational-machine. New York City can both drive and break this machine. There is so much going on, and the art world in particular at this historical moment is so huge. There is a lot of good stuff out there, and a lot of crap. Inspiration for me is as much in opposition to something as it is in admiration of it. Decoding why you think something is crap can be motivational. Clear enemies help you define your position—'I am against that.' This is useful not only with other people's work, but also with my own. I find it easier for me to work on something I don't like, to try and 'fix' it, than to work with something I am happy with.

10) What do you enjoy most about printmaking?

There are so many reasons why I keep circling back to printmaking. Ever since I became obsessed by printmaking I have been trying to break out of it. But it is just such a flexible medium. It is really only recently that I am comfortable with taking a stance and saying 'yes, I'm a printmaker.' For the longest time I would assert I am an artist, and if I use printmaking it is in the service of art, not to make 'prints' per se. For me it is silly to be making editions in the year 2011. There was a point in the pre-mechanical reproduction era where humans in a printshop were the precursors of machines, and making exact copies of something was interesting. But now that we have the machines, we should use them to be humans, and not to become machines.

11) If your prints were music, what instrument would they be?

Well, I've never thought of it like this before. I can say it would certainly not be a flute or something ephemeral like that. That Beck song comes to mind, 'two turntables and a microphone.' But maybe I would rewrite it to say something like 'two turntables and an automach.'

12) Any other questions you want to be asked/answer?

I recently read the last Tony Judt book, "Ill Fares the Land". In it he laments the passing of the 20th century's grand liberalism/social democracy

project. He says that not too long ago young people wanted to contribute to society—to become doctors, teachers, and engineers. But now we are stuck in a culture of narcissism. He cites a recent poll of kids in Germany where something like 50% of the youth claim they want to become artists. He places this against a similar stat from not too long ago when only something like 4% aspired to the arts. For him this signals they end of people wanting to 'participate' in society. To me this means exact opposite of what he posits. Many people become artists precisely because they do want to participate in community and contribute to the accumulation of social knowledge. The problem is not with the kids or with the artists; the problem is with mainstream society systematically shutting down all the arenas where alternative models of living, thinking, being, and knowing can exist.

Questions and Answers

Questions: Charlie Schultz for ART in PRINT

Answers: Rob Swainston

July 2011

1) You've been combining printmaking and installation art at least since 2005. What inspired you to present your prints in such an untraditional manner?

There are a number of interrelating factors at work here. First of all, and this may sound funny to 'traditional' printmakers, there is a logic to printmaking that, if followed, is directed toward sculpture and installation. The printshop—with all its machines and processes—is a 3 dimensional logic system, a logic that, like installation, operates in space. As an artist, one of the 'things' we do is pay attention to the environment in which we operate. This can be more conceptual (i.e. institutional critique), but this sensibility can also be more physical. There is also a material logic with printmaking that leads toward installation. I consider paper (and through it the image) a sculptural medium. One of the first things you learn about printmaking is the multiple. In an environment where nothing is precious (because you can print another one), and where you have lots of material, you can be free to cut up, reassemble, reprint, overprint, install, deinstall. Here is where the printmaker sheds the idea of the edition, of the exact copy, and embraces the multiple. The multiple is repetition; repetition over time mutates and changes. This is where we are as a society. And of course we should be making work about this. Print into installation does this.

A third pressure directing me from printmaking into installation is the challenge of our generation to break down the barriers between disciplines.

To me, the borders between the various art mediums are arbitrary (as is the border of 'art' itself). It is good to have a skill set, but why limit yourself to that? The dominant pedagogy informs us to challenge the foundations of our knowledge. There is also a stigma attached to printmaking. Where I went to grad school there was an open hostility to printmaking. There is a hierarchy among artistic practices, and printmakers are at the bottom. Printmakers are the second-class citizens of the art world. They are the workers, not the thinkers (and we know how that plays out in society at large!). It is only recently that I would even identify myself as a printmaker, asserting instead that 'I am an artist first.' But if you look around us at our image driven society, how knowledge has become visual, how the spectacle is image, and how the partial basis (or fault) of this condition lies with the printed image (that is printmaking), then printmaking in the year 2011 is an entirely defensible position in the art world. Indeed, issues around the printed picture may be one of the most important things we as artists are working on.

Another seduction of printmaking into installation is how a print-based practice plays out over time. I think it was Nancy Spero who described how this works. Every print you do is like a word. Because you still have the material (the plates, the blocks, the screens) these words can be combined to make sentences. Eventually if you keep working on new words and continue to work with the old, these sentences will form paragraphs. Now you can start making arguments, telling stories, staking out positions, and building discourses.

After going on some about 'presenting prints in an untraditional manner' I have to call in question the notion of 'tradition' in printmaking. I just went through a number of ways in which I think printmaking moves into installation. The tradition of printmaking itself challenges its own tradition. The history of printmaking is a series of innovations. This is both technical invention (from cave hand print to relief then intaglio, lithography, photography, and now digital) and social innovation (the printed image as a discourse). Let's look at the technical. Why are some things 'traditional' and others not? The lithograph is basically the photocopier of the 19th century. Why can we not embrace the photocopier as traditional printmaking? The photograph and through it film and the moving image came out of experiments in the printshop. Why do we not call them printmaking? What the art world today calls 'installation' is a relatively recent innovation (let's ignore architecture and the church here). Installation is an artistic innovation that relates directly to the dominant social innovation of our time—the spectacle (the term 'gesamtkunstwerk' may be more palatable here because it carries less political baggage). The 20th century artistic invention of installation is linked to the social technology of the spectacle. And if you properly identify the specta