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Author(s): Kathan Brown

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Wasting and Wasting Not: How (and Why) Artists Work at Crown Point Press

Kathan Brown is the founder and director of Crown Point Press, a workshop for etching located in Oakland.

Fig. 1 Workshop at Crown Point Press, Oakland; artist Wayne Thiebaud at right.

"All that light!" Brice Marden said, reminiscing about his first visit to Crown Point back in 1972. "I'd been in New York for years, and I didn't know if I'd be able to do anything in all that light. But even though you see hills in the distance, it is a city; you know you're in a city. Every day walking to the press from the hotel I'd pass that green ceramic building, the I. Magnin building. What a beauty! I love Oakland." Then, as an afterthought, "The moment I walked into the studio at Crown Point, I knew it was a good place to work."

My instincts about the place had been good (**Fig. 1**). At first, moving into a loft in downtown Oakland from the basement of my home in Berkeley, where Crown Point had been located since its beginning in 1962, it seemed that we had too much space, too much light, too cavalier an attitude about heavy things that have to be carried up a pair of narrow flights of stairs. The loft is still rather impractical. Every time a crate of etching plates is delivered we have to open it on the sidewalk and then we all swarm up and down the steps like ants, each with his portion of the load. "The difference between our place and theirs," said one of my employees after a visit to another print publisher, "is that they have a loading dock and we have our arms and legs; and everything in our place is homemade and everything in their place comes from a printing supply house." And with only a trace of envy, "It all looks so efficient." We have sacrificed efficiency so that artists who come here can know, immediately, that it is a good place to work, a familiar place, an artists' studio, not a factory. In order to have this space and this light and this view of downtown Oakland we waste time and motion;



Fig. 1

to conserve the energy of our spirit we waste the energy of our bodies.

We waste other things, too. Handmade paper at one, two, or three dollars a sheet. And copper. I'll never forget the look of horror that came over Barry Le Va's face when he was first presented with a polished sheet of 36x45" copper. "Can we *waste*?" he gasped, and his desperate question was greeted with a gale of laughter from his two printers and myself—we often joke among ourselves about our wanton use of this precious material. I have passed on to my printers a lesson I learned long ago, 1964 or 65, from Richard Diebenkorn, who was the first artist published by Crown Point Press (**Fig. 2**). I knew that he used mostly newsprint or student drawing pads for his drawings; I warned him that such paper would eventually crumble into dust, but that didn't seem very important to him. I didn't think the cost of buying better paper was important to him either, because at Crown

Point he sometimes would use twenty sheets of metal in a single afternoon without worrying about the expense (which, at the time, he was bearing). Finally I realized that he was not doing anything to sell, or to last, or even to make. He was doing it to *do* it, and sometimes he could do it, and sometimes he couldn't. And when he could do it, it was the result of momentum, a headlong plunge that would be impeded by the preciousness of any materials he might feel would require extravagant care in handling. So, if he were going to work in etching at all, he had to think of the metal plates as if they were newsprint; there really wasn't any choice—except, of course, to resist doing prints.

And, unfortunately, that is a choice that has been made by many artists who would find great interest and insight in working with etching, if they could get past the notion that making prints is somehow precious and stilted. If it is thought to be so, it

Fig.2 Richard Diebenkorn, Aquatint with Drypoint Halo, 1978, sugar aquatint with drypoint and burnishing, 24x17 1/2".

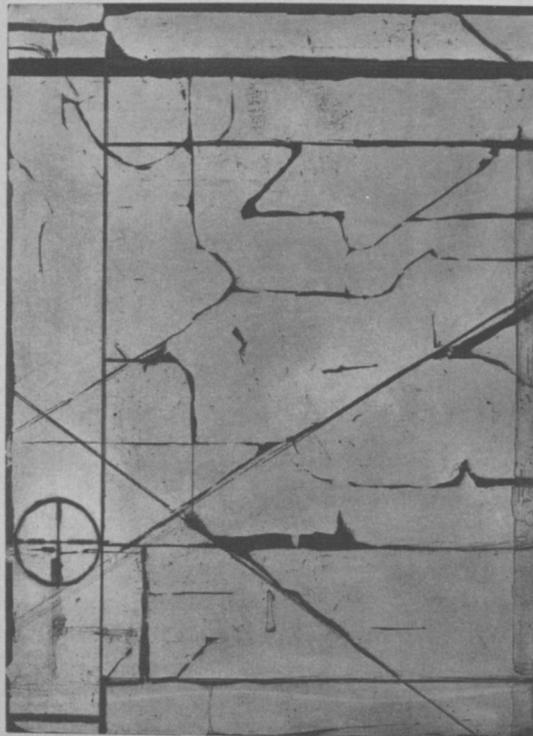


Fig.3 John Cage, Signals, 1978, etching, 6/25 from a series of unique impressions, 8x12".

Fig.2

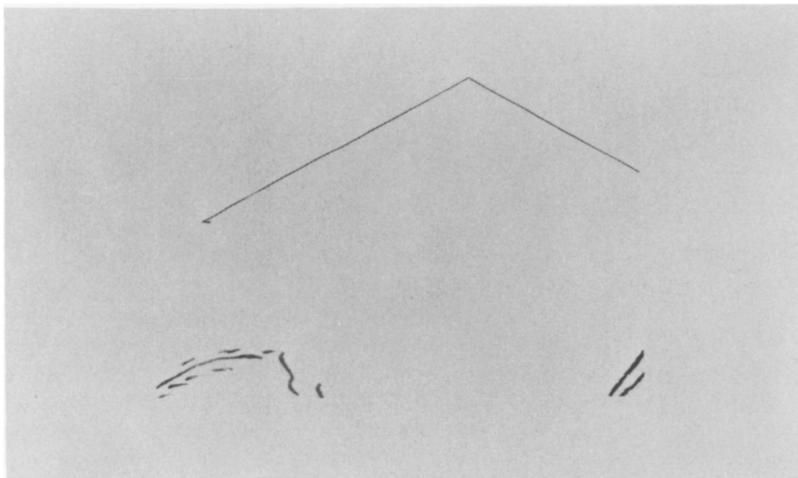


Fig.3

shouldn't be. One of the uses of printmaking to an artist is to shake him up a little, to take him outside his normal routine, to expand, not constrict. "I came to California with the light heart of a writer of travel novels," said the Italian artist Jannis Kounellis, whom I brought here last year to work with us. That is how it should be: an adventure, a pleasure, a way of being outside one's familiar territory.

"What is important is that the mind be changed," John Cage explained to a visitor he had invited to meet him when he was last working at Crown Point. "That is more important than that the work be good. Of course, we'd like to have our cake and eat it too—to have good work with a good mind. And," he added, with a glance of complicity at his printer, "we are actually pleased with the work."

I have all this on video tape. Normally I refrain from introducing cameras, for fear of intruding on an artist's concentration. But a special circumstance caused me to make this intimate document, which shows Cage's relationship with his work and with his printers, Lilah Toland and Hidekatsu Takada, over a period of ten days. "Come on, Lilah," he calls out on his way into the darkroom, grinning, holding a print in his hand, passing the other hand over his forehead, "Oh, my." He is like a little child on the way to the movies. "Lilah, can I go in?" Or he is restrained, thoughtful. "Takada," he says, "can you please tell me what, out of all these combinations of marks and etching times, what will produce nothing?" The faces of the young printer and his sixty-seven-year-old questioner for a moment fill the screen. "Nothing?" the printer replies, reaching for a page of test strips. "96 and 45 will produce nothing." "So," I interject, "you will use these tests as a guide?" "Oh, no," replies Cage. "I'm working without a guide. I am creating a situation similar to nature. Due to the concatenation, sometimes nothing results." Cage is both enchanting and demanding, working late into the night, catnapping on the couch, keeping the printers working for sixteen hours at a stretch. Lilah is getting very tired. She says, setting her jaw a little, "John, can you tell me which of these images are going to disappear? Should I bother mixing up the ink for the images that aren't going to be on the plate?" "No, sweetie," comes the reply, "of course not. I'm not going to give you any unnecessary work." She laughs. Cage uses chance as a discipline, and so requires that every chance-determined direction be followed through completely and then checked for

accuracy, even if the printers, because of their experience, know that nothing will result. Lilah's laugh reflected hours of work on plates that finally appeared almost empty (*Fig. 3*). Nevertheless, after a couple of days on the project, we all knew, with the certainty of those who have grasped an important truth about living, that indeed none of the work, nothing we had done, was unnecessary. Such revelations are among the rewards of printers.

Lilah Toland and Hidekatsu Takada are two of the five printers who work full time at Crown Point Press. The others are Stephen Thomas, Nancy Anello, and Paul Singdahlsen (*Fig. 4*). People often ask me how I choose printers. I don't like to hire people who have experience in other print shops. We can teach skills to quick learners; the more important qualifications cannot be taught. I look for people who are interested and interesting. They must, above all, be sure enough in themselves so that they don't need to be overbearing or bossy; oddly enough artists can be easily intimi-

gine, interest in ideas—but the ideas themselves are the artist's territory. We do try to understand how the artist normally approaches his work; because he makes an effort to help us do that, sometimes things become clearer to him as well as to us. For his part, the artist has to learn to understand the materials we are offering him. Because of our presence he can do this a lot faster than he could alone, but ultimately if he's going to produce very good work he has to comprehend the materials and the process on his own terms, concretely and specifically.

Once that is accomplished, the artist becomes the guide and we are running to keep up. And that's why it happens that we have been technically innovative from time to time over the years. We work from a completely traditional position; I am fond of saying that the materials and techniques we use are exactly the same as those used by Rembrandt and Goya. In fact the powerful, natural materials—wax, tar, acid, metal, rosin, sugar, and soap—are poeti-

Fig. 4 Stephen Thomas and Hidekatsu Takada with Wayne Thiebaud, checking proofs of Thiebaud's etchings in the workshop at Crown Point Press.

Fig. 5 Tom Marioni, *Cafe Society Beer*, 1979, bottle of Anchor Steam beer with a label containing soft-ground etching, hand engraving, embossing, and gold leaf stamping. Note: This is a social work of art; to complete the work, the beer must be consumed, shared by at least two persons.



Fig. 4

dated by printers. Perhaps that is because artists are used to working alone and are at first uneasy with another person and insecure with a new medium they don't totally understand. So if the printer is too authoritative at the beginning, the artist might tend to retire, let the printer lead. And we don't want that. That is what causes the common complaint that all the prints coming out of a particular press look somewhat the same—if they look the same, it is because the same printer made them. Our printers deliberately avoid this. We want the prints to look as if the artist made them.

We think of ourselves as guides, or perhaps teachers, but not as collaborators with the artists. In a collaboration, both parties must provide original ideas. We provide support, skills, sensitivity, intel-

ligence, interest in ideas. They use these materials for their own purposes and our skills assure that the way they are using them will produce purposeful results when printed. If we have truly understood what might be useful to a particular artist, we—artist and printers together—can sometimes stumble into territory where these materials have not been before. Sometimes artists, without even realizing it, offer us tremendous technical challenges; and one of our greatest problems is not to get too excited if we solve them, not to set too much store on technique, not to become too enamored with the results of extraordinary competence, and, especially, not to provide more competence than the artist needs. I know that the open-ended involvement of artists in our technical gropings can sometimes be frustrating for everyone, but that

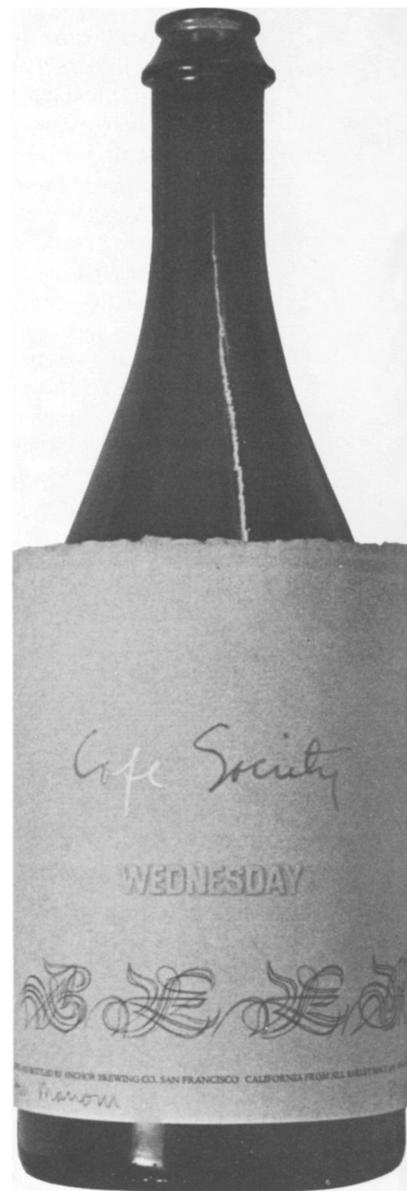


Fig. 5

is better than to have the artist blithely drawing, worry-free, with the printers struggling in another room or even sometimes, in another building or another town to produce signed (yes, it does sometimes happen!), sealed, and delivered printed images of those drawings. Of course, those are reproductions, and—as I disdainfully say when someone unknowingly calls our prints “posters”—we don't make reproductions at Crown Point Press.

In fact, I don't think we *make* anything at Crown Point Press! Oh, yes, we do have a gallery full of beautiful framed pieces of paper with our logo in the corners. But those are not *things*, at least not manufactured things; those are results of work done, ideas explored. The artists speak of the etchings, along with other things that they do, as their “work.” This work is “only a step that leads to other things” (Robert Barry), “a poetic record of the culture” (Tom Marioni) (*Fig. 5*), “a vision of history expressed in metaphors” (Jannis Kounellis), to quote three of our artists.¹

Forgive my idealism! I have always wanted to make some positive difference in the world. As a teen-ager I did volunteer work in a hospital; I gave up a summer vacation from college to teach children of migrant farm workers. It is my temperament; if I thought Crown Point were “just” a business, or even “just” a print workshop, I don’t think I’d be so interested in it. But I really believe that art is a powerful and useful branch of philosophy that can, if given enough time, change the world, because art changes the way that people see the world. Art results from a knowledgeable and creative individual’s following a pattern of thought beyond its logical conclusion to a place that seems so obvious and simple, once it is discovered, that it takes an artist with confidence to reveal it and, at first, a public with imagination to take it seriously. If I can give a few of these knowledgeable and creative individuals a few more tools to work with and then give some access to their work to a larger, more imaginative public than would know

tors and art professionals.

One of the etchings we recently published is a counterfeit Italian 10,000 lire bill printed on both sides of a large sheet of paper and carrying Chris Burden’s signature (*Fig. 6*). The print is a comment on art and money, but most of all it is about the perception that many people have of what print publishers are doing: printing money, big sheets of money. And that is true—but only if the artist is a Midas anyway. There are perhaps six or seven living artists who could sell anything they would sign, but heaven forbid that they should be aware of that, at least while they are working. Their time, as Thoreau said about his own, is too valuable to spend making money. If an artist whose work sells very well works with us, we strengthen what he is doing and he strengthens what we are doing. His presence in our group helps us sell other, usually younger, artists not yet at the Midas level. It is not so easy to make money for artists working with unfamiliar ideas, but we have been able to do even that; every

making money. The artists we publish are by and large artists’ artists—those who have the respect of their contemporaries and who have influenced younger artists. They are all original thinkers who also have the grace, style, and visual sense to make their ideas sing. They are not all of the same “school,” but they are all moving forward, not backward, and they are all questioning, thinking people who are, in their attitudes towards their own art, *doing* something rather than *making* something. People sometimes ask me how Richard Diebenkorn “fits in” with Vito Acconci or John Cage or Joan Jonas. He doesn’t have to “fit in”; all really good, really original artists fit in with each other in the long run.

Remember the lesson I learned, early on, from Diebenkorn. “Waste Not” he spelled out in a sampler form on a little collage he made for me out of torn fragments of prints the last time, six or eight months ago, that he worked at Crown Point. “Waste not?” you say. “But I thought that the lesson was to waste—waste paper, waste metal, waste time . . .” Yes, it was. But the sampler says, “Waste Not.” That, I guess, is lesson number two. There’s something much more important than the piece of copper—and that more important thing is what you must not waste. It is the artist’s involvement and concentration.

Here is what I think are four keys to being a good printer: to be present and competent without being intrusive, without putting out constrictions; to feel honestly that doing this work is an adventure; to waste, if necessary, materials and time; and, most important, *not* to waste the artist’s momentum, concentration, and pleasure in the work. **End**

Notes

1 Quotations are from *View*, a monthly interview monograph published by Point Publications, 1555 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland, California.

Fig. 6 Chris Burden, *Diecimila*, 1977, etching, 3 1/8 x 6 3/8”.



Fig. 6

that work otherwise, my evangelical impulse is at least assuaged. The Indonesians have a saying that when you walk idly on the beach you have no special form, but when you walk purposefully towards an important place you gather a shape around you which precedes you to your destination.

To walk purposefully one must choose a path, and I have chosen the path of the viable artist-oriented business. Without ever having had family money, backers, or grants I have spent seventeen years putting one foot in front of the other and now, I report with some pride, I am coming onto level ground. Crown Point is not just viable; it is a successful business with ten enthusiastic employees, unqualified support from virtually all the artists who have ever worked with us, and continually growing interest from a diverse group of art collec-

artist published by Crown Point has made at least some money from his prints and, of course, as the years go on there will be more. When I published Richard Diebenkorn’s book of forty-one etchings in 1965 we sold it for \$4000, less than \$100 for each print. The price of the book hovers now around \$40,000. We still sell etchings very reasonably when they are first done, some (even today) for as little as \$100 to \$200. And everything we have done in the past has increased dramatically in value over a few years’ time.

I don’t see any conflict here with my idealistic stance about making art that will be a positive force in our culture. There is nothing wrong with an artist’s making money from his art; what is wrong is his *worrying* about making money from it, associating his work in his mind with