Printmaking as Collective Action: Interview with Richard Nielsen

Richard Nielsen discusses Metabolic Studio's printmaking initiatives as sites for collective action and transformation.
Charlotte Cotton
I want to start by asking you about the veterans’ print studio that you set up at the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration. It was a facet of Lauren Bon’s Strawberry Flag (2009-10) action. But how did it come into being?

Richard Nielsen
I have been a printmaker since attending art school in Vancouver and had recently spent time at a print studio in Havana. By that time, image-making interested me less than what can be done in printmaking that can’t be done anywhere else. It wasn’t until I met Lauren and she introduced me to social practice and collective action that I realized this was what printmaking is — that sharing a mechanical making process can be a community-based effort and spark our creative spirit. Once you understand that this is what a print studio can be, it transforms who comes together and their creative output. The Veterans Print Studio was a perfect fit with the ethos and unfolding of Strawberry Flag.

Once we gained access to the unused buildings around the Strawberry Flag quad, we found much of what we needed for a print studio in basement rooms. There were veterans’ paintings, art supplies from defunct art therapy classes, tools for mounting photos, and a broken t-shirt printing press. Other rooms were full of broken beds, piles of lamps, tables, and all the basic things we needed to get a printmaking studio up and running. We cleaned everything, including the rooms, and created safe and inviting spaces for the veterans. We had running water, accessible bathrooms, and set up the print shop in a room with windows on three sides, so it had great lighting. We made a gallery in the front of the space and hung the veterans’ artwork that we found in the basement.

A print shop requires some materials but not as much as you would think. And, certainly, when I think back to communal press work, there were times that we had one working press and it was like a printing “dance” that would move through the room. Everyone intuitively knew what part of the process they needed to take on for the printing process to work. I think we got there to some degree with the veterans’ print studio but it took some time because the veterans were each dealing with their own personal challenges. Opening up to a collective dynamic and releasing thoughts and emotions through creative processes was a big step for them.

CC
How did you structure the purpose — the invitation — of the print shop to the veterans?

RN
We needed printed material for the various activities that Strawberry Flag embodied — performances, open-mic nights, the regular “high teas.” We needed recipe cards, invitations, posters, and other printed material to distribute.
So we started with the practical idea of meeting those printing needs. A few veterans came to our events, but their skill sets didn't really fit in with everything that we were doing for the construction and engineering of the Strawberry Flag. There was one veteran — Jerome — who showed me his drawings, which are great, and so I suggested to Jerome that we make etchings out of his drawings. I brought a small etching press over to the VA and then taught him how to print. Jerome worked in the print studio diligently every few days in the hours that he had permission to leave the home on the VA campus.

CC
Jerome got the ball rolling?

RN
He did. Other veterans began coming to the print studio and at one point we had a dozen, so we tried to expand and keep up with what they were interested in. We had gotten hold of a Riso machine, and, because etching is such a specific and laborious process, we started organizing a lot of mono-printing — in part because you don't have to be an exceedingly talented draftsman to get a good visual result. Then we started doing silk-screening and that's what everyone wanted to do. They wanted to make t-shirts. Jerome stayed on, kept on doing etching because he loved it, and became the day-to-day print shop assistant. Jerome and I taught a simple silk-screening process using a yellow film; veterans would cut out a shape, draw their image on it; and put it on the silk screen to print their T-shirts.
What was appealing about t-shirt printing especially?
Well, they could wear their art and they could share it. If you made a unique t-shirt, it’s your image and everybody else wanted it. Not all the veterans who were using the print shop had a home — somewhere to hang up a print on paper — and to make something and be able wear it that day was important. And making t-shirt images is a gateway to making more art — a way to start thinking about image-making, bigger concepts, and deeper feelings. It was a space in which the focus was on something other than recovery and their issues. And they could just sit around, listen to music, and help clean up at the end of the day if that’s what they wanted to do. I think many veterans are probably at some point told that their visions or their imaginations are a bad thing because it’s what probably keeps them up at night, it’s the thing that triggers their addictions. We didn't have any official connection to the VA’s services, which tend to be highly structured, but they allowed the veterans to go to AA meetings at night, watch TV, or come to our print studio.

The other part of it was that just outside the print studio building, there was the Strawberry Flag, and a constant stream of programming that offered creative revisions of life on the VA grounds. Strawberry Flag was always active and it had this way of slowly breaking down people’s concerns and inhibitions. Some veterans would just hang out on the steps, then they'd sit in the green tent and look at some books, then they’d visit the kitchen to see what was going on, and eventually they’d come to the print studio. The positive energy was non-judgmental: "Hey, do you want to come and play, do you want to come and hang out with us, do you want to come and do something with us?" The labels that veterans feel they are tagged with got to change — even if it was only for half an hour while working as an artist before returning to their place. Some of the veterans really thrived in the Strawberry Flag environment, enjoyed being asked to participate in the building of something. I think that the kitchen, the print studio, the library area, and the newspaper office each brought people in to participate and that’s why it really grew. Whatever their reasons for coming to the VA campus, these are intelligent and capable men with histories and skills that we invited them to activate in safe and positive ways. That sort of liberation, which many of Lauren's projects invite, was crucial. The goal is that the participants in the studio’s actions take it over and run with it — develop it on their own, expand upon it, and keep it going. We had a successful run with the silk-screening because the really dedicated veterans just took it over and made it work.

CC
What did you learn from the process?

RN
I learned so much. I learned that encouragement, when it includes a sharing of amazement for what you're able to create, is very liberating for a lot of people. It was liberating for me because I learned how to coach or coax
virtually anybody to feel that amazement at creating something. It could be tough working with veterans who had a hair trigger, but there were moments when all that tension went away. I have images in my head of some of the toughest veterans with very active demons making beautiful drawings, finding some beauty and self-expression.

I think it was important that we regularly brought in other creative people from the outside world to meet them. In some cases, we would bring other artists into the print studio to create a dialogue around the idea of sustainable creative pursuits. Most people work and most people have to figure out how to fit two things in together. There were many nights when we would talk about strategies like that — what's okay, how much can you do and still call yourself an artist. We're always said, "You can do as much as you can do ... you're an artist now."

I also learned that it was both harder — more work than I thought it would be — and that it's easy to get exhausted. The bureaucracy is more soul-depleting than I had expected; eventually that catches up with you. There is no real way to fight back without causing a stir. We didn't really want to do that because we had also made friends who had supported us there. We also didn't want to wreck it for the veterans. I was relieved that veterans — Larry and Curtis — took over running the print shop and kept it going for another year after Metabolic Studio was so gracelessly forced off the project.

The veterans' print studio was a catalyst for me to think more about a print studio as a community-based artwork, more than the results of the printmaking. I like that you get good results sometimes but I like it even more that a group of people work on something together but talk about something else. I think it's quite wonderful when you transcend the process, and we did learn that on the VA. I've attached that meaning to all the print studios I've worked in. I started the print shop in Chinatown and that functions fantastically — it's a much smaller venture that is both a collaborative space and a community open space. The experience of working with veterans really affirmed that I enjoy facilitating creative practice in other people and putting together a space for making.

That's been the guiding tenet of the Reimagine Everything print studio at Metabolic Studio since the beginning of 2017. It relies on the same energy as its guide. In the end, really what I do is talk to people about making. Every idea is worth talking about — and suddenly, you're talking about an idea for a print, you're talking about a shape and how that shape works with another shape or a color. And you are talking about communicating something that is personal to you immediately and in the present moment.
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