

SUMMARY

Jiř DANIEL

SLOP! SLAP! POPULAR WORKSHOPS OF PARIS DURING MAY 1968, ONCE AGAIN

At the beginning of May 1968, a vast movement of occupation of university campuses and workplaces developed, in support of the largest strike in France's history. At the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, an artisanal printing workshop – the popular workshop – was set up almost immediately, eventually producing over three hundred different posters, flooding the streets of the Latin Quarter and the locations of the protest movement. Dozens of people were welcomed there: artists, architecture and painting students, strikers from different unions, members of the bohemian community, revolutionaries, and so on. Everyone participated to varying degrees in the production or distribution of prints. The organization was collective, individual signatures were abolished, and shared actions made for a unique way of creating. Soon, other groups followed this model and extended the production of posters throughout France.

The event permanently changed the practices of artists and activist groups, embedding artisanal printing into the repertoire of actions of grassroots social movement organizations. The purpose of this text is to outline the contours of this practice while highlighting the importance of attention to neglected minor aspects. To do this, it is necessary to understand the functioning of the workshops, their political approaches, their compositions, and the distribution of tasks within them, as well as the role they played in the broader landscape of forms of expression of the movement.

On Technique

If thousands of posters were printed and the number of workshops grew so quickly, it was because the necessary equipment and know-how were already sufficiently accessible. However, testimonies reporting the means available in the early days at the former École

des Beaux-Arts (the “ex-Beaux-Arts”) in Paris point out some initial limitations: in the first few days, only manual lithographic presses were usable. Thus, the occupants had to find a significantly less cumbersome printing technique, better suited to the ambition of a poster creation workshop. Screen printing met these needs. The first technical demonstrations in the occupied places brought together many of those involved, and very quickly the basic know-how was transmitted within the workshops. The simplicity of the tools and actions made it an accessible technique that could be learned step by step. This allowed the popular workshop at the former *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris to print several posters simultaneously on different tables. However, this high printing rate also required significant logistics, from acquiring materials to the distribution of prints. In this respect, the screen printing of the popular workshops was profoundly collective. While some sought out inks, papers, glue, gasoline, and information, others were needed to cut, draw, prepare frames, print, and clean. Small groups took care of pasting the posters on the walls of the main locations occupied by the movement. The relatively rudimentary nature of the screen printing process used in the popular workshops was also one of its main strengths: it was easily teachable, required few resources, and necessitated the production of simple forms, which favored its widespread and rapid expansion during the spring of 1968 and allowed non-professionals to create posters, or at least assist in workshops.

Interest in the Unrecognized

Choosing to take the popular character claimed by the workshops seriously meant developing research based on a premise of equality among participants, that is, disregarding the hierarchies of prestige that distinguish recognized artists from students, men from women, artists from workers, which in turn highlighted the contributions of groups generally of little interest to art and graphic history. A recurring image in testimonies about the two main popular workshops is that of a beehive. The occupied places are described as spaces of intense circulation where encounters can be at least partially detached from many conventions and co-optation practices. It is also important to consider that individual paths may have significantly evolved between the beginning and the end of the event. Thus, relying on socio-professional categories to understand the distribution of actions is a task that loses (a bit of) its relevance even though social determinisms always carry significant weight. One of the main forms of distinction that occurs in responsibilities at the popular workshop at the former *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris is based on the separation between inside and outside. Outside, are the curious who come to see, the strikers who come to place orders or learn screen printing, the dilettantes who occasionally drop in without really contributing to the production, and the supporters who deliver materials. Inside, we find painters, students, young bohemians, as well as a handful of sympathetic printers who work more or less continuously. Interest in the minor, usually unrecognized aspects, allowed our research to become aware of the value of modest contributions: students who only stay for a few hours, from time to time, in the workshop; the existence of very small workshops, necessary but undervalued tasks, etc.; and thus, to account for the importance of minimal or anonymous participation. Apart from the occasional exceptional figure, the popular workshops are revealed in their fragilities, their hesitations, their disagreements, that is to say, in a multitude of actions and presences that anyone could identify with, which enable an awareness of the hitherto unattainable extraordinariness that surrounds them.

Contextual Analysis and Expressive Landscape

To understand the rapid development of militant silk-screen practice, it was necessary to consider the many forms of image and narrative dissemination surrounding their creation. These modalities follow patterns specific to three circuits practicing imagery: a militant circuit is busy distributing posters directly, that is, without mediation, and providing material means for their production; a media circuit reproduces visual objects and disseminates them through media, these images possibly being perceived as information; finally, a circuit specific to art structures, dedicated to objects recognized as artistic and potentially historical, which takes up the posters. These three circuits are distinguished more by distinct networks, uses, and rhythms than by different technical means. They are nonetheless porous and interconnected. Even within militant circuits, it is important to remember that political expression takes many forms that are related to each other, such as leaflets, meetings, bulletins, demonstrations, newspapers, actions, and posters. Consequently, the posters of the popular workshops never exist in isolation; they are always inserted into a broader landscape of various forms of expression. The movement's press, in particular, plays an inspirational role for the popular workshops by relaying news, slogans, and photographs that become raw materials used to create new posters. In return, the workshops' posters are widely reproduced in the press, and the printed slogans are sometimes chanted in demonstrations.

Conclusion

In the end, it should be recalled that a month and a half occupation was enough to generate the printing of thousands of posters and give countless people a sense of legitimacy to express themselves. It should also be borne in mind that this experience of communal and collective work was built on a multitude of (small) daily actions much more achievable than the aura of exceptionality attributed to the popular workshops might suggest at first glance. It was not so much a few individuals with extraordinary talents that allowed this immense production, but rather the mass of anonymous and generous small initiatives that gave material existence to an enormous ambition.