

Institutional Publics: The Risograph's Transvaluation of Fidelity  
by Lucas Reif

The Risograph is a digital stencil duplicator first introduced by Riso Kagaku Corporation in 1986 for small-to-mid-scale printed dissemination within offices, churches, and schools. As competing Xerox copiers continued to dominate the market through the end of the century, the Risograph fell into general disuse, but a recent resurgence in independent print has seen these machines reclaimed and repurposed to new ends. Riso-printed posters, zines, and books have become wildly popular amongst a new wave of art book fairs and institutional programs supporting small press publishing culture, generally harkening back to late-1960s Conceptual critiques of gallery art's opaque commodity form. Even SAIC for some years now has, alongside cutting edge courses in new media and generative systems, offered classes dedicated to Riso printing, a process often described through its imperfection: flawed smudginess, finicky operation, and a distressed visual quality; all seemingly at odds with expected hierarchies of resolution, sharpness, and fidelity, not to mention a general historical trajectory of dematerialization.

Such a contemporary resurgence seems to betray the oft-impending *death of print*, invoked and prophesized *ad nauseam* by the likes of Marshall McLuhan and even *Ghostbusters*' Egon Spengler. [Janine Melnitz: "I bet you like to read a lot too," Egon Spengler: "Print is dead."] Today the printed page is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. Rather, the printed page occupies a contradictory historical juncture: it appears to haunt contemporary visual culture and permit an imagined identification with autonomy and transgression, what I term the *neomaterialization* of print. Print, the way we refer to it today, seems to have less to do with a specific media form—of course encompassing countless disparate image transfer technologies—but instead a unified cultural imaginary. Lest we forget Fredric Jameson's charge that postmodernity finds us incapable of fashioning representation of our own current experience, the Risograph print emphatically stands in as an ambiguous amalgamation of dead styles, genealogically tethered to the mimeograph, the silkscreen, the offset press, and the Xerox copier, yet bearing no absolute, direct historical antecedent—it is the bastard child of print itself, spectral in the Derridean sense that the history we ascribe it is always already absent.

The dominant liberal criterion for ascribing value to an image has been inverted, that criterion being most strongly ascribed formerly to something like fidelity as a document, and now to something like its authenticity. In analyzing crossovers between the digital and the analog in my essay *Riso: Neomaterialization, Subsumption, and the Specter of the Press*, I return to the notion of fidelity, canonically analyzed in Hito Steyerl's writing on the *poor image*. Steyerl writes that the poor image "transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value." It harnesses a subterranean speed of unfettered dissemination. But the nature of the Risograph print today, despite its visual appearance of "poorness," seems to overturn Steyerl's interpretation of value precisely because its poorness is *only* an appearance. The Risograph print can no longer be a poor image; in fact, any poor image ceases to be poor upon being named as such.

Filmmaker Charlotte Prodger's 2018 Turner Prize-winning work, *Stonemollan Trail*, for instance, featured an accompanying Riso-printed didactic for attendees of the Tate Britain. Surely the Tate can afford the highest-quality of print reproduction for the popular annual exhibition's attendees, who pour in by the thousands to see the latest in contemporary visual art. Thus the use of risography becomes an especially intentional, textual decision: what do we read in its degradation? Speed? Democracy? Antagonism? User "ashbinx74" has listed several copies of Prodger's exhibition brochure for sale on eBay. Price after shipping: approximately \$73 USD. Mind you: this was a *free takeaway* from a show that was up *last year*.

Contra the subversive potential of the poor image, risography's poorness is a kind of cult-value-qua-exhibition-value in the most literal sense: it produces a withering of fidelity in order to shift visual register, and it trades in any actual speed of dissemination for an outdated mythos of democracy. This intention lingers as an excessive semiotic residue in the printed page today, though its anachronism belies any contemporary political power. An image's poorness has become its authenticity, its material expression of production and transmission.

Consider RISD graphic design professor Paul Soulellis' *Urgency Reader*, a Riso-printed "experiment in publishing as a gesture of call and response: the quick circulation of a charged collection of texts—in some cases raw, in-progress, or sketchy." In preparation for the publication's upcoming second issue, an Instagram post by Soulellis signals a call for

submissions: “I’ll print a few or maybe even only one copy, scan it, and redistribute your material online.” One can extrapolate in this instance that the printing itself (preceding any act of physical dissemination) imbues the text with a new array of visual signification, such that intermediary printing (materializing) and scanning (re-dematerializing?) are deemed valuable and even *necessary* steps in the process of “quick circulation” by which the image reaches its audience. With what does this transfer imbue an image? A historical association with the fixity of the archive? The labor struggle of the print worker? The political charge of the pamphlet object? If nothing else, certainly a vague aura of the authentic: the real and familiar stability of ink on paper.

Its *raison d’être* displaced, the Risograph is now used—rather than out of any financial or material contingency—to harness the idiosyncratic aesthetics of its output, to signify a certain value, regardless of compatibility with an institution’s purported mission. We can take a walk through Facebook’s headquarters in Menlo Park to uncover an exemplary study: a portion of the company’s facilities have been converted into the Analog Research Laboratory, a creative space for design and art making at Facebook. The Analog Lab (for short), which now has some nine sister locations across Facebook’s international network of campuses, features a plethora of printmaking resources, including silkscreen stations and Risograph duplicators. Facebook employees pump out vividly colored Riso prints promoting mindfulness and human connection just down the hall from hulking data centers; a social media monolith has subsumed and sponsored the cooperative ethos of print work in order to foster “togetherness” and “autonomy” amongst employees, a kind of corporate art-making retreat. In his 2017 article “The Arts at Facebook: An Aesthetic Infrastructure for Surveillance Capitalism,” Stanford professor Fred Turner describes a site-specific installation created on Facebook’s Seattle campus as part of the company’s Artist in Residence program. In giant, red vinyl letters against an unfinished plywood wall, the work spells out “SOLIDARITY” and appears blocked by cutout images of activists holding protest signs. The artist commissioned by Facebook to create this installation spoke to Turner: “For this piece specifically, I wanted to incorporate the general public who’s going to be viewing it. So it’s actually a feeling that you’re a part of this thing instead of looking at this spectacle. You’re actually engaging in the act.”

Recurring graphic-text motifs promoted on the @analoglab Instagram page include “switching off,” “people over pixels,” and “slowing down,” yet a recent run of Riso-printed zines commissioned by Facebook features a self-aggrandizing timeline of rapid user-base growth and corporate expansion alongside illustrations of Black Lives Matter activists. Text set in a weathered, faux-typewriter font reads, “#BlackLivesMatter becomes one of the largest hashtags in social media history,” and, “Facebook opens up many new LGBTQ-friendly gender identity and pronoun options,” a kind of hegemonic, data-driven Pride parade.

Design researcher Joyce S. Lee observes that “Facebook’s offerings of [Risographs] as a form of recreation for its employees seems intended to insidiously warp the self-perception of their labor.” I’m inclined to agree with her. After presenting a similar talk to this one at the North American Risograph Conference this past fall, I’m met with an Analog Lab representative self-identifying to the room. She is soon joined by a Google employee, swift to defend his own footing within the company: he contests that the formation of a Risograph printing studio on his particular Google campus was anything but sanctioned by the company. Instead he frames its onset as an act of rogue reclamation at the hands of a small employee cohort—an internal rebellion! Overlooked in this sort of rebuttal is the strong historical precedent for managerial restructuring that has supported exactly this sort of dissidence. It also overlooks the reality of company-sponsored airfare and accommodations to attend an out-of-state conference about a printer.

Risography in the Analog Lab has been remodeled as a safe playground for the aesthetic simulation of co-operative labor organizing, as if Facebook’s designers and developers—the contemporary creative class—had suddenly been proletarianized. Riso gestures toward the *correct* disruptive orientation toward work, a manufactured and permitted antagonism, and the Analog Lab signals as if it were a union, rapidly incorporating counter-cultural critiques of bureaucracy and industry through “deconstructed” and “distressed” styles. This is the impotent embrace of the workforce as an amorphous bastion of progressive values. It remains oblivious to its own potential. Identitarian piety is prioritized above the basic organizing rights of employees, and Facebook’s protest posters and solidarity wall stand in as perfect foils for, say, actual protests or actual solidarity.