

Mel Bochner: IFPDA Print Fair 2014

Prints and Printing; Expanding the Field

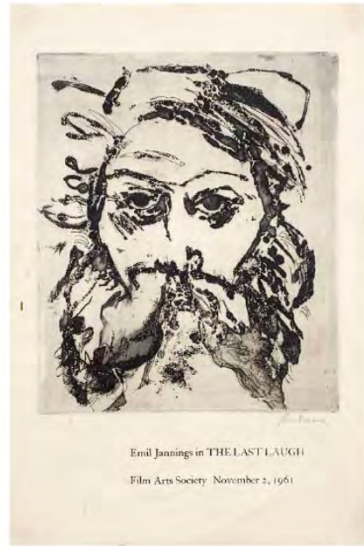
To print is to transfer an image from one surface to another. But the word print is both a verb *and* a noun, a process and its product.

It is the enormous variety of means for transferring an image from one surface to another, of transforming a process into a visual object, which has kept me engaged with printmaking for over fifty years, always trying to expand the boundaries of what constitutes a print.

As we go through the images today you will see that I constantly return to certain key ideas and strategies. But these ideas are not static. They respond to, and are altered by, my engagement with the processes that bring them into being.



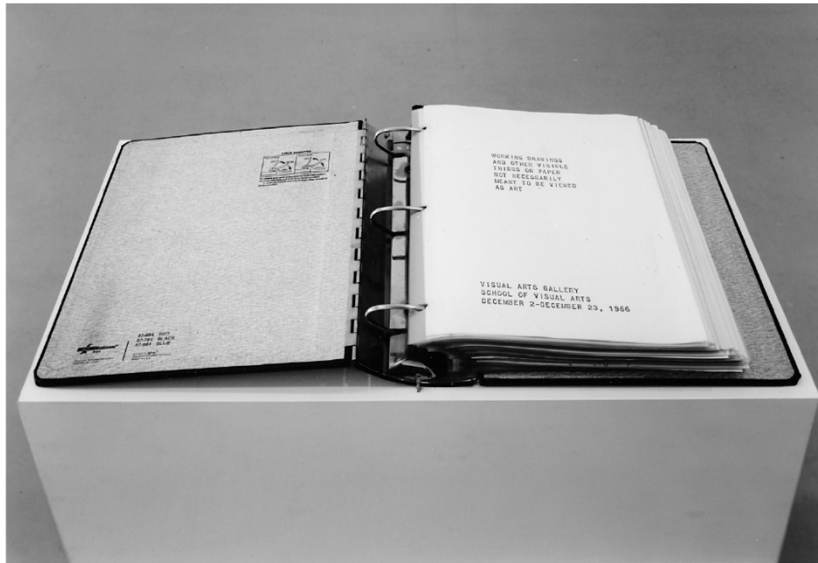
These first two images [above] are posters I designed and printed in 1961/62 while still in art school. They are linoleum cuts and were hung around the school to advertise the upcoming movie for the college's Film Arts Society. They are probably the earliest use of text in my work, in this case letters cut by hand to imitate type.



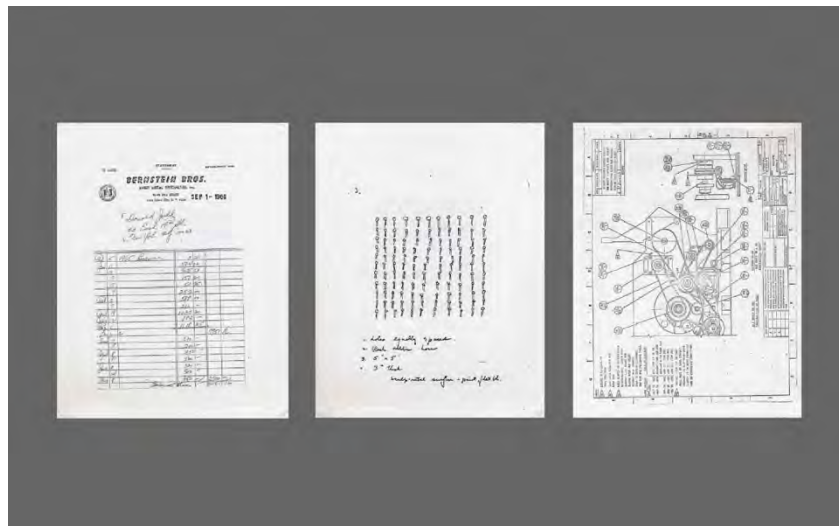
Two more of my posters. The “Last Laugh” image is a sugar lift aquatint, beneath which the title has been set in type. The portrait of Greta Garbo as “Gosta Berling”, is a hand-drawn (not photographically reproduced), three-stone color lithograph. The title is set in an antique wooden typeface.



This open-bite etching, also made while a student, used strips of masking tape as a stop-out (the first appearance of masking tape in my work). At random points while the plate was in the acid I would remove strips of tape, which accounts for the different depth of the lines. I had read in Stanley William Hayter’s book about the technique of viscosity printing, where different colors are rolled onto the plate, but because additional oil is added to each succeeding layer they do not intermix. The possibility of getting a multicolored print in one pass through the press has intrigued me ever since.



In 1966 while teaching at the School of Visual Arts, the director of the school gallery asked me to organize an exhibition of drawings. At the time I was very involved in exploring how an idea becomes an artwork, or the thinking behind the thought. For lack of a better term, I called them “working drawings”. I collected a group of these kinds of drawings from friends and colleagues, but when I presented them to the gallery director, she was horrified. By their very lack of finish, and material scruffiness, they fell far beneath her minimum definition of a work of art. And furthermore, she was unwilling to pay to frame them. Hence my dilemma: how to present these drawings? As an art history instructor I had unlimited access to the school’s brand new Xerox machine, the most advanced technology of the day. So I photocopied them, transforming these odd-sized and shaped scraps of paper into a neat stack of 11 x 8.5 inch pages.



Without my intending it they had already become a book. I put the pages into four identical ring binders and placed the books on identical pedestals in an otherwise empty gallery.

I titled the exhibition “Working Drawings and Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art”. It has subsequently come to be referred to as “the first conceptual art exhibition”.

SEVEN TRANSLUCENT TIERS [(N+2) CENTER SETS ODD]: SEVEN

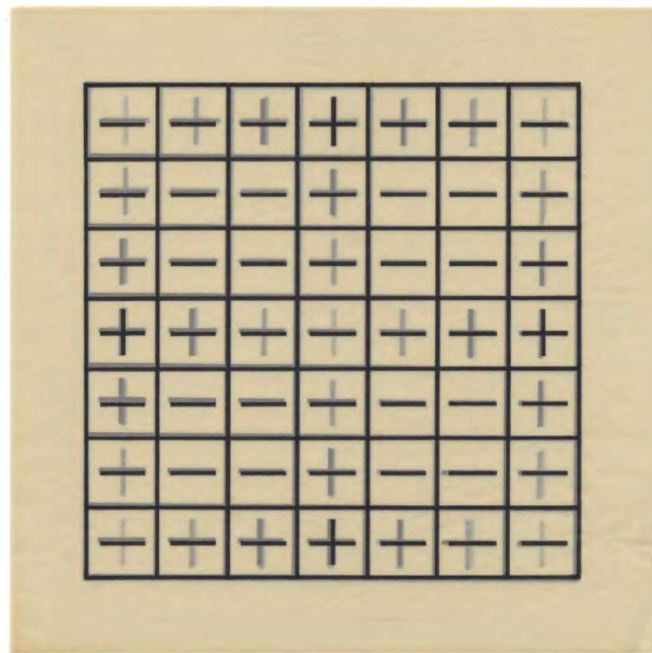
PRESENCE (-) = ABSENCE OF ASSIGNED MORPHEME/MEL BOCHNER

1	3	5	7	5	3	1
3	0	0	5	0	0	3
5	0	0	3	0	0	5
7	5	3	1	3	5	7
5	0	0	3	0	0	5
3	0	0	5	0	0	3
1	3	5	7	5	3	1

DISCRETE, SELF-CANCELLING, ISOMORPHIC, SERIALIZED, TIERS

(LEVELS), ON A 7th ORTHOGONAL GRID, IN BINARY LANGUAGE (+) =

For Aspen Magazine 5+6 (1967), I designed this folder piece to be printed letter press. On the cover of the folder is the numerical plan of a sculpture.



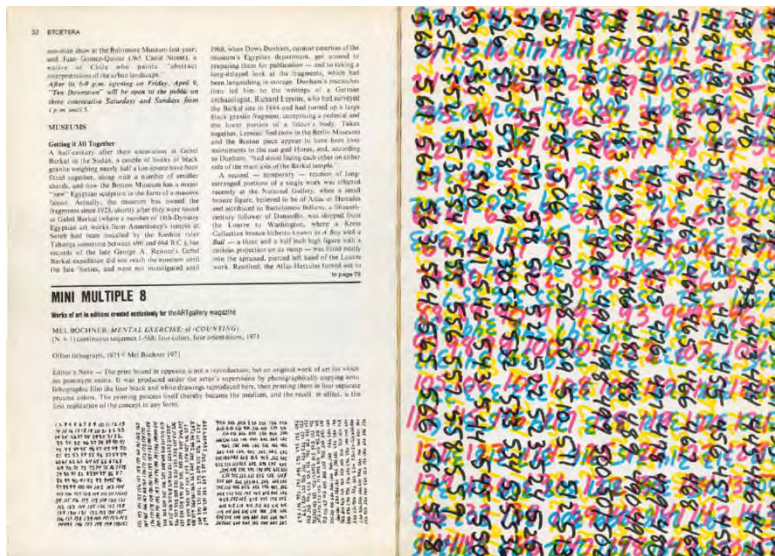
Inside are seven sheets of tracing paper on which were printed pluses and minuses. When the sheets are stacked up the number of pluses equals the number printed in each square on the cover plan. The result is a paper sculpture roughly two millimeters thick. At the time, the thinnest sculpture I could imagine.



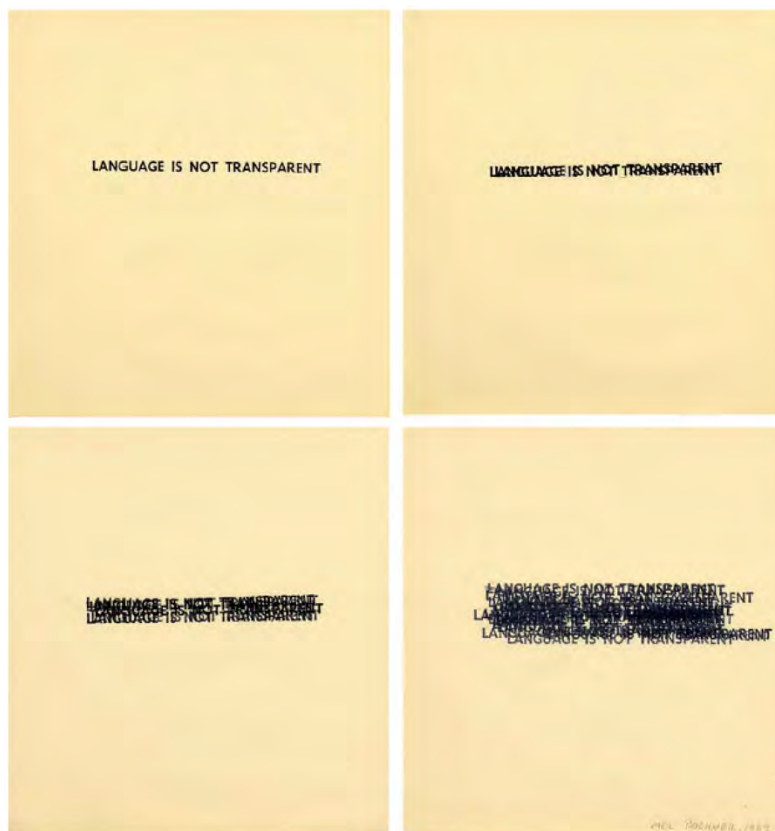
In 1967-68 I was confronting the orthodoxy of the grid in minimalism through the use of photography. For these two pieces I crumpled up a photograph of a grid shot in perspective. I then Xeroxed the crumpled photo, transforming it into a flat image. Next I had the Xerox reprinted as a negative photostat, which is what gives it that strange solarized quality. As a cheap way of making a color photo I then dyed it in the sink using Tintex dye (think 1968, tie-dyed tee shirts.) Finally, to estrange it still one step further, I cut each one out, eliminating any sense of background or context.



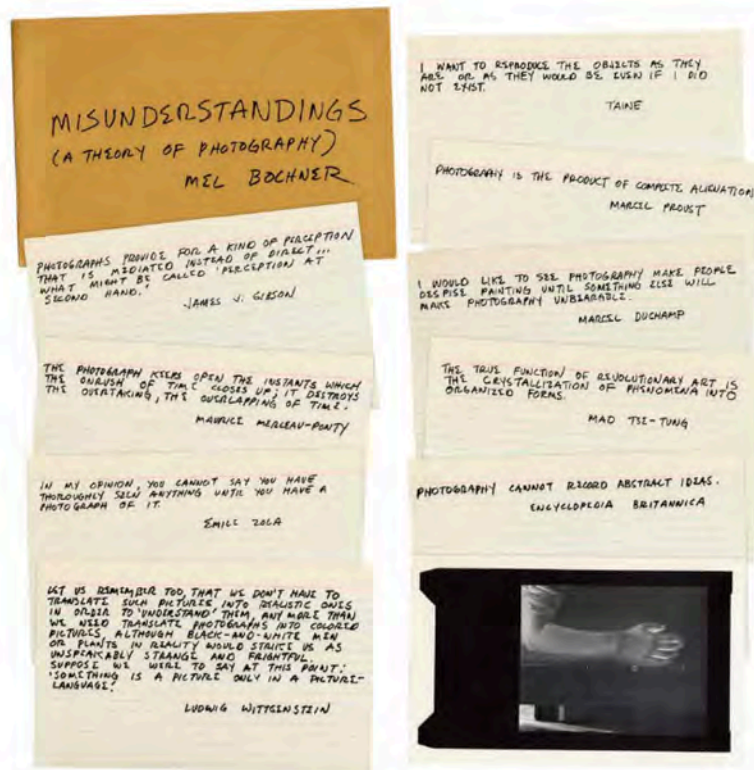
This is a photo-offset lithograph, printed using a mixed color font. Once again the fascination with making a multi-colored image in a single pass through the press. Unfortunately the publisher didn't like this print and it was never published. It exists only as this unique proof.



This is another form that my magazine interventions took. I wanted to subvert the basic idea of a reproduction by producing a reproduction-*as-the-original*. In this case the four-color printing process itself became the subject matter. All four drawings were drawn in black, as seen at the bottom of the left hand page. I had no idea until the magazine was printed, what the finished work would look like.



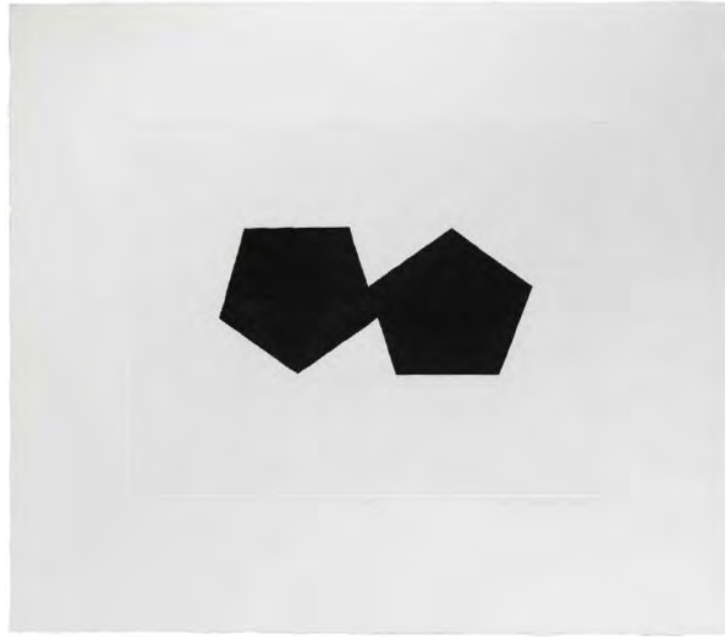
By 1969 Conceptual Art had become an international movement. A belief seemed to be taking hold that language offered a direct access to thought. The notion that art could be magically “dematerialized” seemed like naïve idealism to me. In this rubber stamp piece I expressed my doubt that language could ever convey unambiguous meaning, because, as language proliferates it simultaneously self-obliterates.



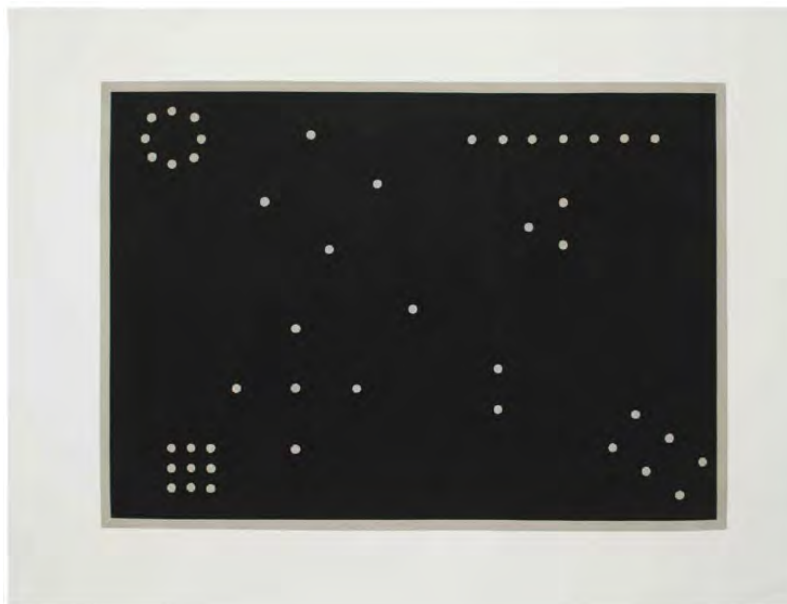
A set of 10 facsimile note cards and a manila envelope printed by offset lithography. Each note card contains a quotation related to the nature of photography, but three are fakes. I have never revealed which are which and nobody has ever guessed all three correctly. The point being made, long before digital photography, is that photography and truth are two concepts that should never be used in the same sentence. The photo of the hand is also a fake, as Polaroids do not produce negatives.



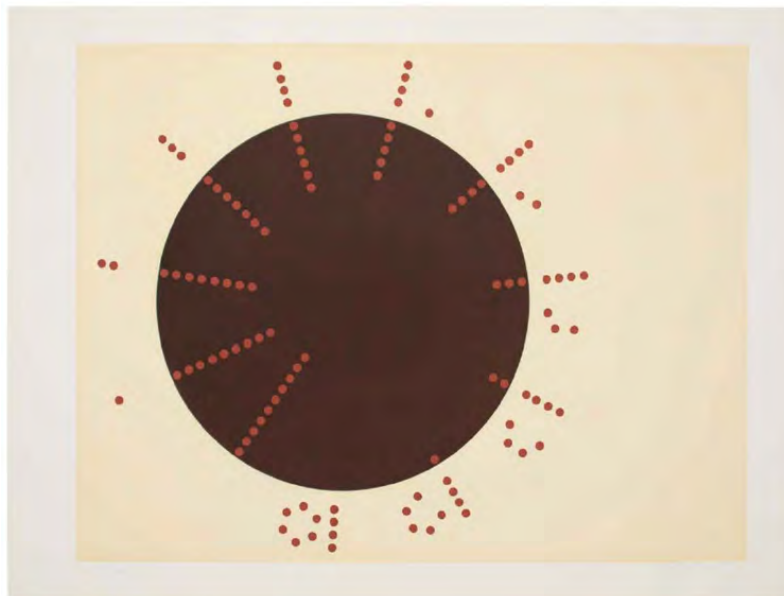
A photograph of one of the note-cards, printed actual size on a black background. It reads, "photography cannot record abstract ideas". But, being itself an abstract idea, recorded here by photography, it presents a perplexing self-contradiction.



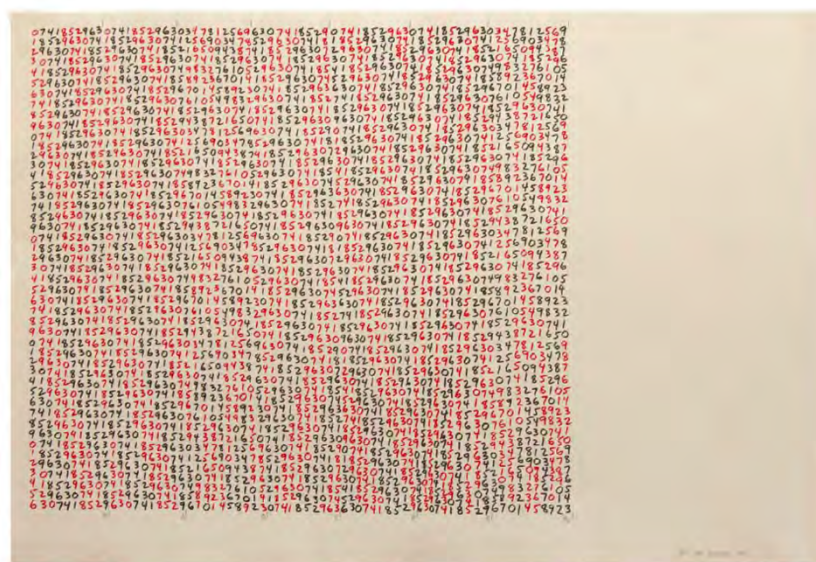
In 1973 Robert Feldman, the publisher of Parasol Press, invited me to make an etching. This seemed like a bizarre idea to me, since at the time I couldn't even sell a drawing. "So why" I asked him, "would anyone be interested in buying something of which there were multiple copies?" "That's my problem," he answered, "your problem is just to make the print." My initial idea was to use the prints as documentation of the sculptural installations I was making at the time.



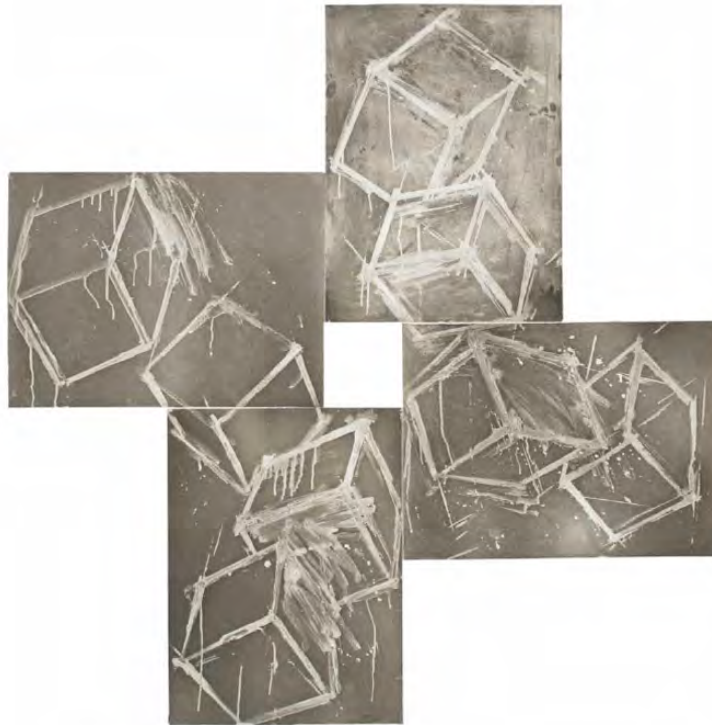
This two-color aquatint "Rules of Inference", is based on the floor plan of an installation of one of my sculptures made of small stones. If you start with the single dot in the center and spiral around counter-clockwise you will see the configurations of dots progress from one to nine.



The title of this three-color aquatint is "Ten to 10." At that time most aquatints tried to emulate the Goya look, granular and gradated. When I proposed making large flat aquatints the printers claimed it couldn't be done. And anyway, they said, if you want a flat tone make a silkscreen. A silkscreen gives you a solid, flat, impenetrable surface, but an aquatint, because the tiny specks of resin let the paper show through, is subtly translucent. It feels aerated, and lets the light bounce back. To perfect the process required almost a year of experimentation, and the complete rebuilding of the studio to accommodate the size of the plates I wanted to use. But in the end, given the results, like the luminosity of the dark circle in this print, it was well worth it.



Numbers and counting are a constantly recurring motif in my work. This is a two-color silkscreen, based on the strategy of my 1973 "Range Drawings", printed at Simca Press. Many of my prints are based on the opportunities that the specific print shop has to offer. I try both to exploit their strengths and at the same time subvert them. Simca was famous for their complex, *multi-screen* prints, like Jasper Johns' "cross hatchings". Which is why I decided to make a complex *single-screen* print. All the numbers were drawn on the screen at the same time. The red was printed first, with the black numbers blocked out. Then the sequence was reversed – black numbers printed, with the red numbers blocked out.



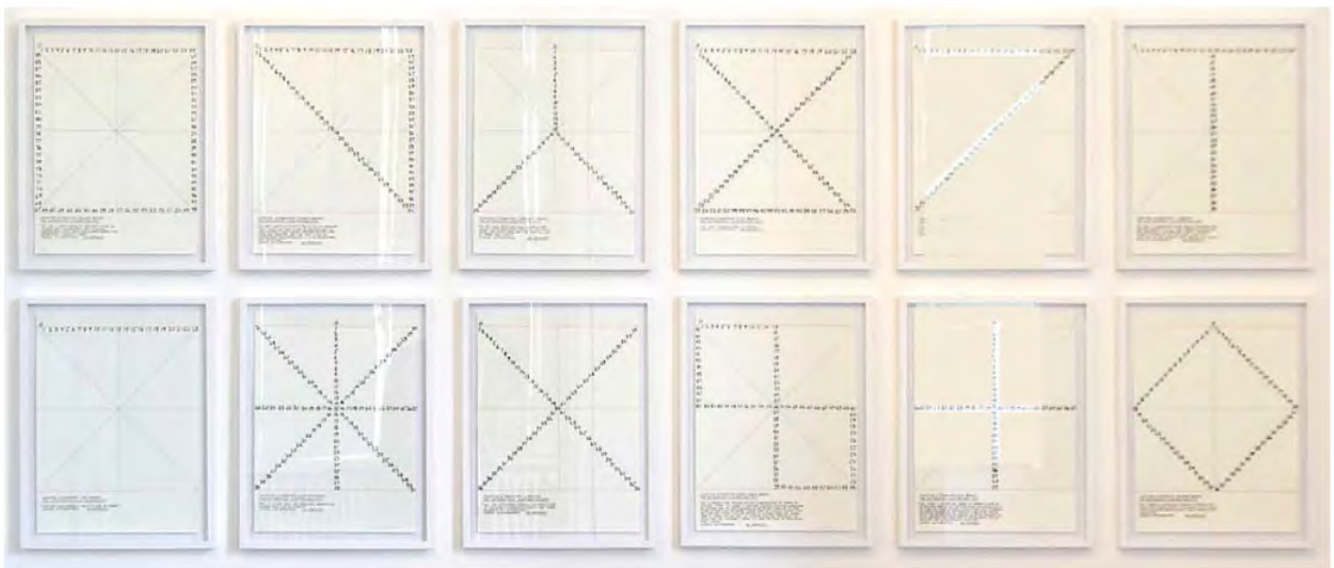
The cubes come tumbling back... For years I was obsessed with Picasso's late aquatints, especially the ones drawn in white on a dark ground. How did he do it? I asked a lot of printers, and although everyone had a theory, when put to the test none worked. It wasn't until I met the printer Maurice Payne in the late 80's, that we were able to figure it out. It turned to be technically extremely simple, as is so often the case with Picasso. This print, one of "Quartets" series, is 40 x 40 inches, and is printed from four individual copper plates.



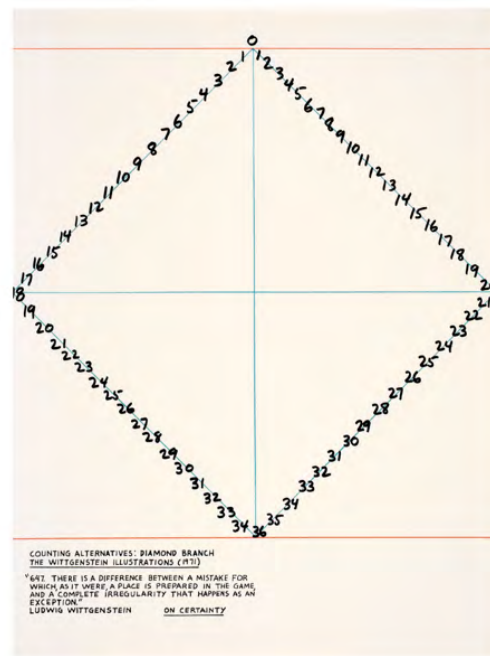
In 1990 I had the opportunity to work with the master ukiyo-e printer Keiji Shinohara. I wanted to explore the classical Japanese woodblock printing techniques, but also to look at my imagery through the lens of the ukiyo-e esthetic, the play of flatness vs. a strangely detached, empirical perspective.



I first made a master drawing, then a drawing of each color on a separate sheet of rice paper. Keiji would glue that drawing to the block and then carve around it, the image being what remained of the surface of the block. From my master drawing he knew how I wanted the colors gradated and would ink and print the blocks accordingly. We met only one time. The entire process was carried out long distance by fax and Fedex.

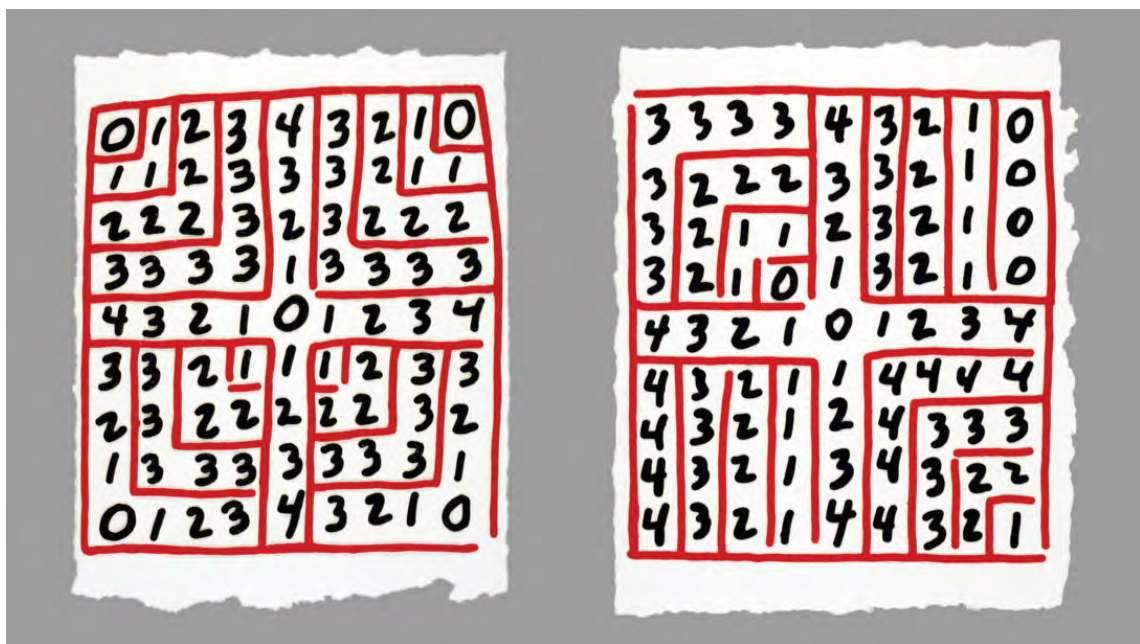


This suite of twelve planographic prints, “illustrations” for Wittgenstein’s book “On Certainty”, is based on a series of drawings I made in 1971. They were redrawn in 1991 and published by the Arion Press in conjunction with the book “On Certainty”. These are not meant as literal “illustrations”, but as a series of parallel images that attempt to show how doubt can be imbedded in a method. It seemed to me that it was not individual images as much as a sequence of images that might illuminate the constant circling and doubling back of Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy.



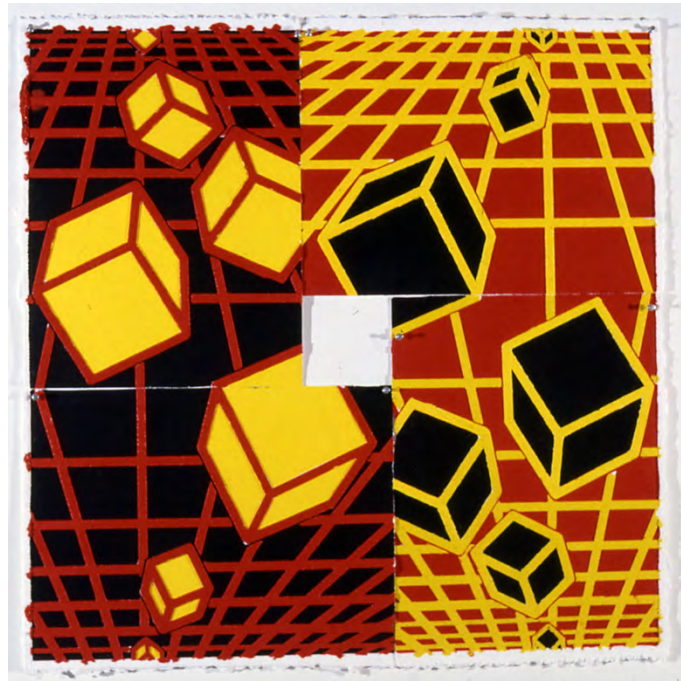
For me the issue came down to the question of how one follows a path (Wittgenstein would say a “rule”), and what constitutes a mistake. These prints explore the concept of branching (as one attempts to follow the sequence of the numbers). Decisions, or which way to turn, (hence doubt) must be made at every intersection. The handwritten numbers, their change of pace and imperfection, represent the spontaneity of thought. As one follows the progression of the numbers, where any path may ultimately lead, or suddenly end, is unpredictable.

Or, in the words of the great American philosopher Yogi Berra, “When you come to a fork in the road, *take it.*”



I came to a major fork in the road when in 1994 I began working with David Lasry at Two Palms Press. From the moment I first realized the enormous potential of his gigantic vertical pressure press, I knew, as Claude Rains says, in “Casablanca”, “this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.” Which it has been,

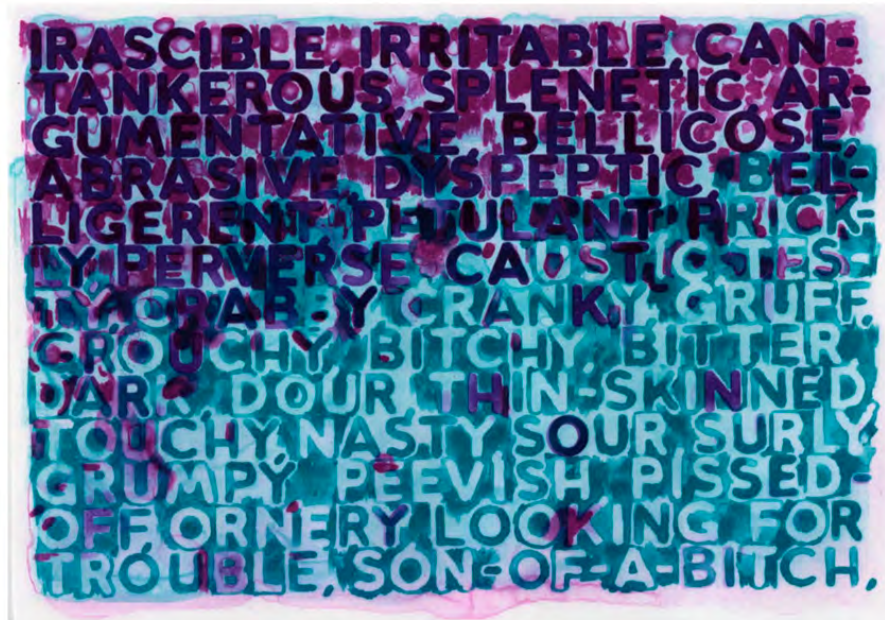
and, twenty years on, continues to be. In our earliest attempts, like these two, we were essentially making woodcuts, carving the image out of a sheet of plywood with a router, and filling the cuts with paint. The imagery itself circles all the way back to my 1966 number drawings.



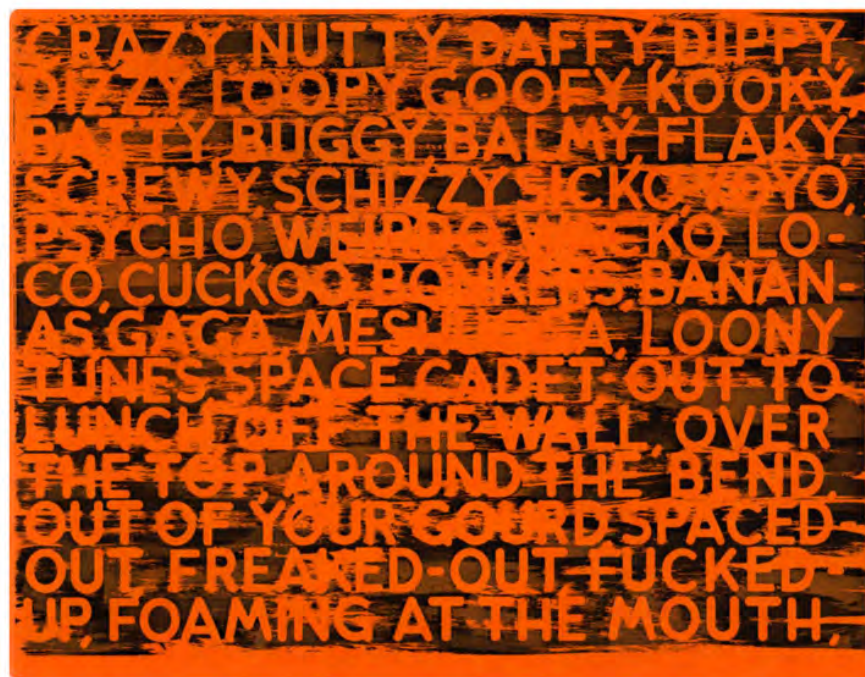
By the late 90's, although we were still carving out the image with a router, we had figured out how to print three colors from a single plate by inking it intaglio and planographically.



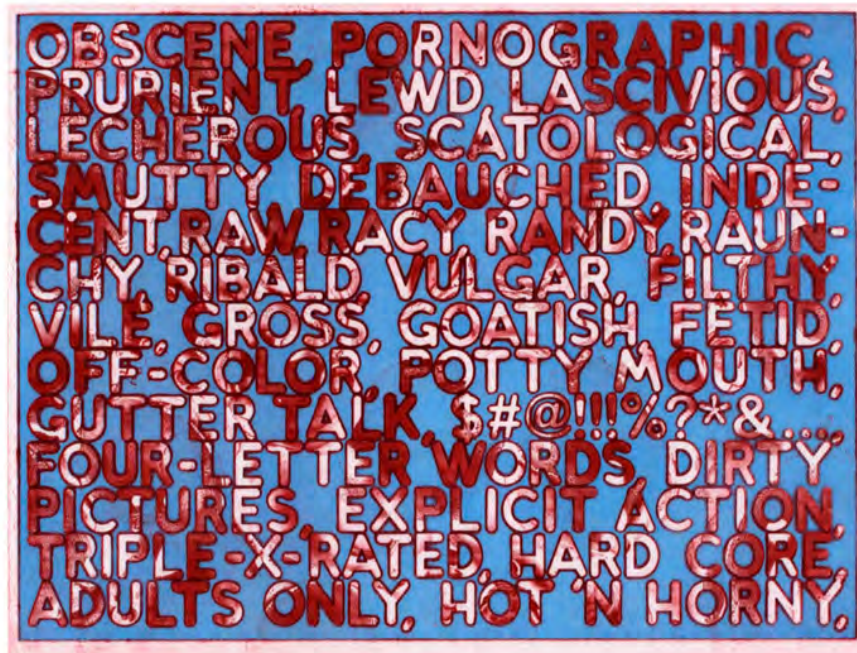
David, over the years, has continually expanded the “menu” of mediums at Two Palms. I was privileged to work on this set of six etchings with master printer Craig Zamiello. Titled “Strong Language”, these prints employ just about every known intaglio technique.



My interest in ordinary language was sparked by my discovery in 2002 of a new edition of the thesaurus. I was surprised to discover it included not only very up-to-date vernacular and slang, but outright obscenity as well. Because children, beginning in grade school, use the thesaurus, this signaled to me a dramatic change in what is considered acceptable or “ordinary” language. I wanted to explore what had happened to the boundaries of public discourse—both linguistically and politically.



In these works I’m trying to evolve a narrative that leads from the first word to the last . . . but one that zigs and zags through conceptual detours and psychological potholes. Although I do not think of my word lists as poetry, there are certain formal constraints involved. The size, proportion, and orientation of the rectangle, as well as the number of lines of text, impose certain boundary conditions.

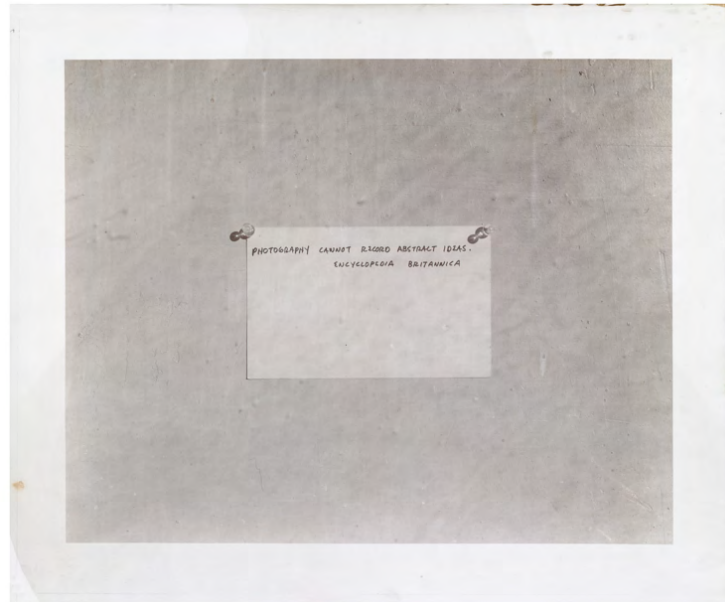


The number of words and of letters per line governs many decisions. While some lists come together quickly, others take months or years, or are still waiting further work somewhere in a stack of notebooks.

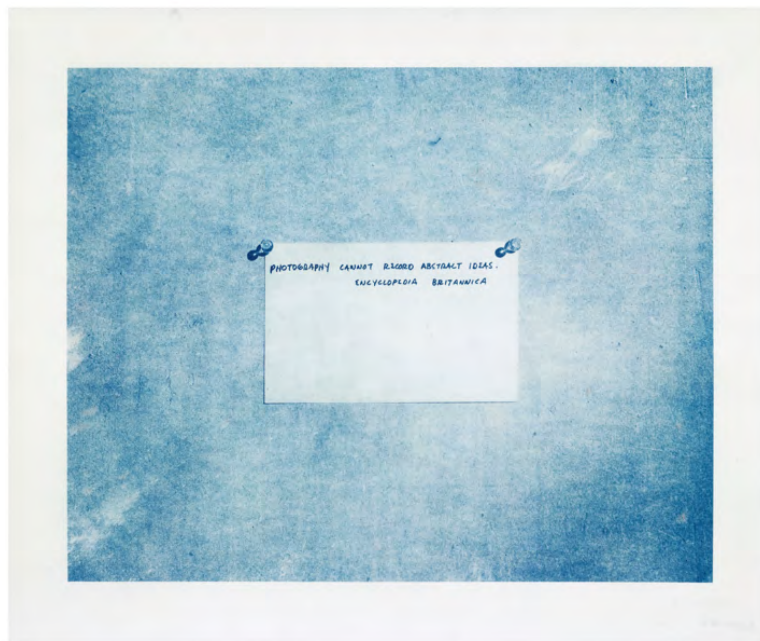


This series, titled “Photography Before The Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” grew out of conversations with the master photo printer Barrett Oliver. Barrett, through patient research and experimentation, has revived a number of arcane and forgotten Nineteenth Century photographic printing techniques. The six techniques used here are: albumen, platinotype, collodion-chloride, gelatin, salt, and cyanotype. I began thinking that these esoteric chemistries and lost technologies, closer to alchemy than to science, offered me a back door into my long abandoned photographic practice. I picked up again where I had left off in 1969, with that photograph of the note-card against a black background. What I could not foresee was how these obscure processes would affect the visual and psychological presence of the image. The dramatic differences in color, tone, focus and detail of each process creates a unique “emotional weather” to every print. I was not interested in these processes for any nostalgic reasons, but rather to open an

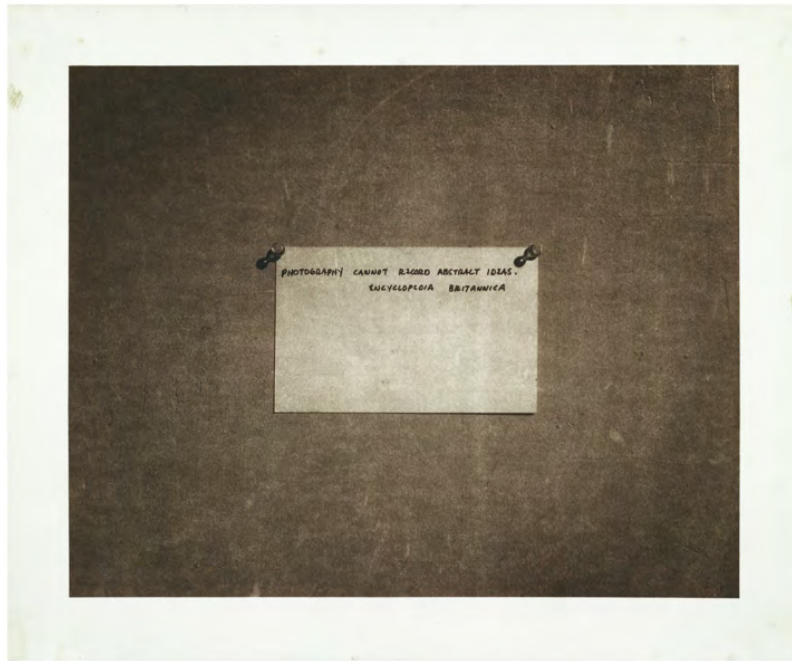
ironic gulf between the contemporary image (note the plastic push pins holding the card to the wall) and the antiquated printing techniques of “photography before the age of mechanical reproduction”. This highlights the greatest of all the “misunderstandings” about photography: it was never, ever, an “objective” record of what appeared before the camera’s lens. It was *always already* a fiction.



This is a salt print.



This is a cyanotype.



This is a collodian-chloride.



As I have continued working on the monoprints, new techniques and methodologies have had to be developed. Most significant are the incorporation of a laser to carve the blocks that are now double thick sheets of acrylic plastic, and the use of the computer to deliver the image information to the laser. As the size of the prints grew, we discovered that there was no commercially available sheet of paper large enough, so we began constructing the paper ourselves as an assemblage of torn-up strips and pieces of pre-dyed paper.



The printing itself became more complicated as the size of the plates and the number of colors per print grew.



Only pure oil paint is used, and all colors are mixed beforehand, taking days, or even up to a week, in advance of a printing day.



After the letters have been filled the plate is placed on the press bed and



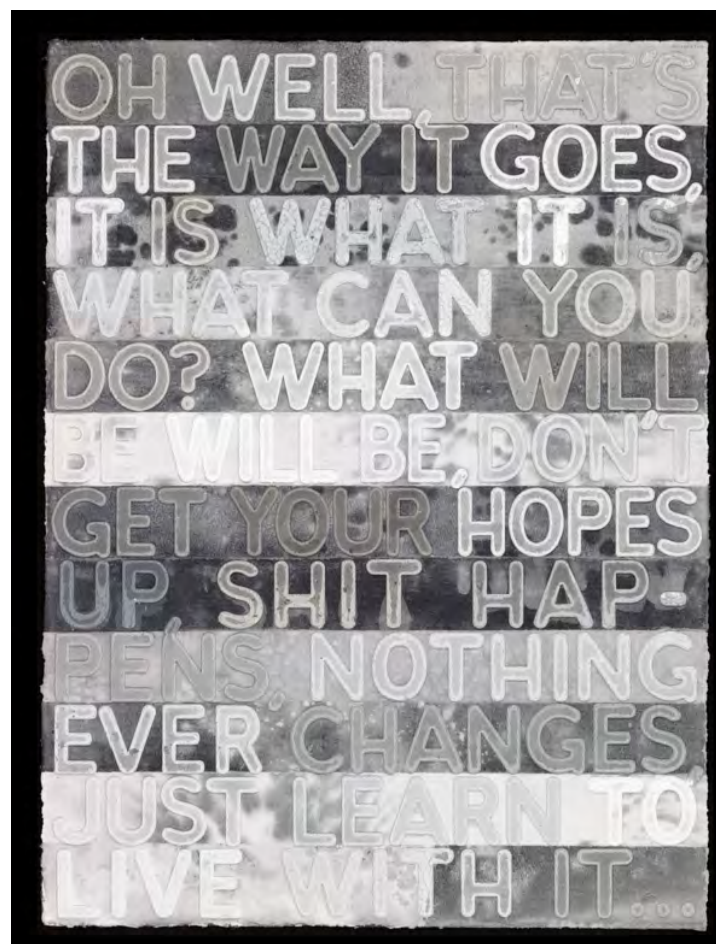
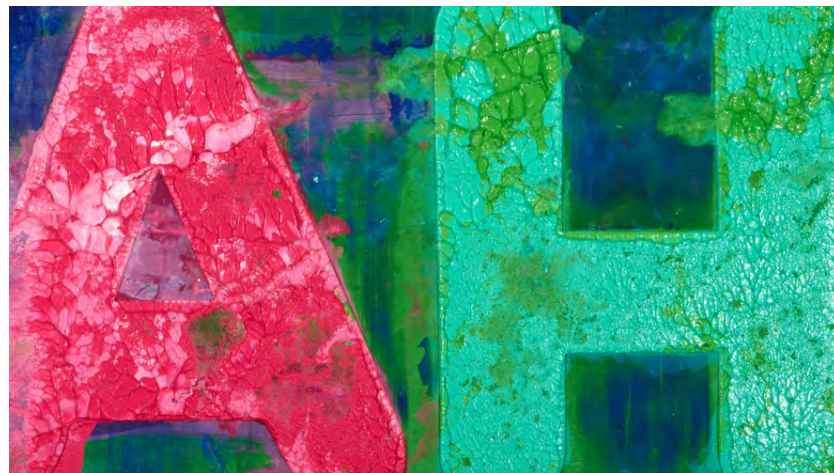
the paper laid face down on top. The button is pushed and the press exerts 750 tons of downward pressure forcing the paper into the letters. With the interaction of so many uncontrollable variables (temperature, humidity, viscosity and atmospheric pressure) there is no predicting what the paint will do.



When the paper is pulled off the plate the result is always a surprise and sometimes a real jolt. Again, each print is made only by a single pass through the press. The paint's chemistry, which is basically a suspension of ground-up stones in linseed oil, determines, beyond any dictates of good or bad taste, what the final print will look like. Under pressure, the paint, with nothing to staunch the bleeding, seeps freely into weird, unpredictable puddles.



The more viscous colors spurt out of the letters, while the densely pigmented ones emerge in marbled globs. The random smudging and smearing, along with changes in value, hue and chroma of the color, renders some words unreadable, obliterates others, and further estranges them from any responsibility to their meaning.





As Walter Benjamin wrote in 1937, “Just as Niagara Falls feeds power stations, so the downward torrent of language into smut and vulgarity should be used as a mighty source of energy to drive the dynamo of the creative act”.



These are six of an ongoing series of aquatint etchings I’m calling “Exasperations”.



I have recently begun working on silkscreens again, trying to push this most obdurate of mediums in some new direction. "The Joys of Yiddish" is a two-color screen print on a thick, cream-colored felt.



It is then mounted on aluminum, and exhibited unframed. It is 63 x 52 inches. There is a subtext here as the colors of the armbands that the Nazis forced the Jews to wear were yellow and black.



This is a twenty-five-color silkscreen print that is derived from a negative of one of the “Exasperation” series images. Talking about exasperation, this print took twenty-five separate color screens to produce... a monochrome!



A very recent printed project, is this 14 x 48 foot ink-jet print for a billboard on route I-70 outside of St. Louis.



Day.



And Night.

I've tried to show you the range of ways I've used, some might say abused, printing over the years, and how essential it has been to the trajectory of my thinking. Etching, engraving, lithography, photography, xerography, silkscreen, wood-cutting, linoleum-cutting, stenciling, rubber-stamping, photostat, letter press, and ink-jet printing. However, I never change mediums merely for the sake of variety or virtuosity. I see every medium as having its own way of revealing something and, simultaneously, concealing something else. A change of mediums offers a way of stepping outside the frame and discovering what's being concealed. And with the rapid advances in printing technologies over the past half century, **S** I'm certain that there will always be a new way of stepping outside the frame.

