**The Poster- Public and Private Sites**

Paul Coldwell

**Abstract**

**This paper will consider the idea of the poster as that category of artworks that operates between public and private spaces. A number of artists are selected and discussed focusing on key works which demonstrate an engagement with either the use of the poster as a site or space or used the form itself in a more conceptual way to make us reconsider the poster’s potential. The paper begins with Warhol’s *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* and then leads into consideration of Felix Gonzalez Torres, both his *Billboard* project and *Stacks.* Further strategies in relationship to the poster are discussed including Thomas Kilpper, Joseph Beuys, Annette and Caroline Kierulf, and commissions Platform for Art. The paper concludes with the authors own recent prints made for an exhibition at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.**

In 1963 Andy Warhol produced a screen-printed mural taken directly from material released by the New York City Police entitled *The 13 Most Wanted Men*. This was a commission, which appeared briefly on the exterior of the New York State Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair but caused immediate controversy and within 24 hours had been painted over. One suggested reason was that the [Governor of New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governor_of_New_York), [Nelson Rockefeller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Rockefeller) was concerned that since most of the men were of Italian descent it would both be insulting to an important sector of the electorate and therefore politically damaging. It also emerged that one of the men pictured had been pardoned so there could have been legal issues had it remained on view. Warhol clearly had in mind Duchamp’s playful *Wanted $2000 Reward*, made in 1923 in New York before Duchamp returned to Paris. Duchamp’s piece takes as its starting point a tourist poster and adds his own image and alias Prose Sélavy. While Duchamp’s poster explores identity on an intimate scale, Warhol’s explores celebrity and is writ large.

In *The 13 Most Wanted Men*, Warhol creates a reversal, taking mages that were made with no aesthetic judgement and presenting them, now greatly, enlarged as art. In so doing he explores that space between public and private, which in many ways is the essence of the poster. Warhol appropriates the original images, low grade mug shots destined for the interior of police filing cabinets, blows them up in scale and places them on the exterior of the building, in this case The New York State Pavilion. Through this action he transforms the images in two distinct ways. Firstly, the half tone dot, hardly discernable in the original, now becomes the clear structure, which both reveals and degrades the image. And secondly the felons now placed in the public domain are accorded the status of movie stars or celebrities.

Warhol’s approval of these fugitives from the law is little different from the treatment he accords to Marilyn, Elvis and Liz. These criminals are stars of a sort, thanks to their appearance in the moment’s image barrage, and stardom is the equaliser in Warhol’s world. [[1]](#endnote--1)

A further transformation occurs due to the controversy in that Warhol decided to paint over the mural rather than have it removed. This left them as a record of absence, drawing attention to the act of erasure or censorship. Warhol used silver aluminium paint to cover the images, producing and I’m now speculating, the possibility of a reflective surface that could serve to reflect the city back to itself and therefore still fulfil the expectations of the commission.

Warhol used the mechanical process of silkscreen to make the mural, in itself a paradox in that a process intended for multiple reproduction is here used to produce a unique work. *The Thirteen Most Wanted Men* fits into a rich tradition where artists using printmaking have engaged with opportunities offered to bring their images to a wider public and beyond the confines and expectations of the gallery. This is clearly the territory that posters occupy but while the vast majority of posters are reproductions of a design that exists in another form, or a means of advertising an event or product, I want to examine some examples of artists who have either engaged with the space or site of the poster or in using the form in a more conceptual way make us reconsider its potential. Warhol clearly meets both of these criteria; firstly by engaging with the site itself and the expectations of the commission, to depict something to do with New York and in his use of screen-print and half tone to explore the syntax of printmaking. In a further reiteration of the project, Warhol later produced these images as individual screen prints thereby taking was first private, then made public, erased and then reconfigured into the art gallery with the conventions of limited edition signed prints, the visual trace of the original mural. As José Roca, the curator of Philografika clearly states, “Printmaking is a tool, and a powerful one at that. But only by acknowledging that its intrinsic qualities make it ideal for saying something that cannot be said equally well in other media can print be reclaimed from technique-as-content and be understood as content through technique.” [[2]](#endnote-0)

Felix Gonzalez –Torres is an artist who explores that space between public and private. In a billboard project *Untitled* 1991, huge posters of an image of his unmade bed, still with the impressions the occupants in the pillows were displayed in various sites across New York. This striking image of intimacy is set in stark contrast to the harsh urban city landscape and challenges the expectation that billboards are sites with something to sell. The billboard, a space of commerce and persuasion is here used to accommodate intensely personal and private concerns. The fact that Torres’ partner had recently died as a result of AIDS gives this work an added poignancy, a sharing of both grief and a celebration of intimacy with the city and its occupants. Given the nature of AIDS as no respecter of class, colour or creed, this act of dissemination to the city as a whole is a particularly telling strategy as Elgar Dietmor explains “ Felix Gonzalez-Torres is advertising something that is precisely not to be consumed but can only be sought after, something that cannot be bought by, but can only be given to, someone.’ [[3]](#endnote-1)

This sense of exchange is also played out in his *Stack* pieces. Here, stacks of prints are displayed in a gallery, unsigned, un numbered, as if in a warehouse, just printed and awaiting collection. Within the gallery they also function as minimalist sculptures, their simple regular structure echoing those forms favoured by Don Judd and Carl Andre. However, unlike minimalist sculpture where touch and inconsistency were frowned upon, Torres stacks invite interaction and to be disturbed by human touch. They are unlimited editions in that the gallery is committed to replenish the stack as the public remove them. The certificates that authenticate these works include the ‘ideal’ height’ the paper, weight of paper and what is printed and how. As an inversion of the poster as a thing advertising something outside of itself such as a holiday, a car or a type of beer, Torres’s prints only sell themselves and invite the viewer to take a print away. “A part of the intention of the work is that third parties may take individual sheets of paper from the stack “[[4]](#endnote-2)

The prints once removed find alternative existences, as posters on bedroom walls, in frames or discarded on the street. They challenge the notion of single ownership and become part of the flotsam of the city. As with the Billboard project, these prints slowly assimilate themselves into the city and into the community. As the artist stated, "Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in." And reflecting on his practice he movingly states that “ In a way this ‘letting go’ of the work, this refusal to make a static form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross (his partner) disappear day by day right in front of my eyes” [[5]](#endnote-3)

While Torres shares the intimate and personal, the German artist Thomas Kilpper makes his work as an intermediary, using the site itself as a starting point for delving into history, both social and political. His first planned graphic intervention, *Don’t Look Back*, was made using the parquet flooring of Camp King, a building in Oberursel, a town northwest of Frankfurt. The building itself had a chequered history, originally ‘a Reichssiedlungshof for the National Socialists during the Third Reich, then a Luftwaffe transit camp for captured allied pilots, and then at the end of the Second World War, it was taken over by the US Army and the CIA. Kilpper explores this history as well as incorporating images from his own family including an image of his own father in his Nazi uniform. The resulting print (or banner) was suspended outside of the town hall in Oberusel contributing to the debate about Germany’s recent history. Making a comparison to the body, Kilpper describes his process as “tattooing the skin of the building and turning the architecture, the floors of the building, into a matrix”.[[6]](#endnote-4)

Later in 2000 in a more ambitious project *The Ring,* Kilpper used the floor of an abandoned office block near Tate Modern in London as the matrix, once again cutting directly into the parquet flooring. Having discovered that there was boxing ring on the site, he used this as the central motif and imagines the audience at a fight. His audience is drawn from across time, bringing together a collection of heroes and villains alongside characters from his own family. He literally then turns the building inside out, displaying the individual portraits in the windows which now act as frames onto the street. Finally the whole banner measuring 400 sq metres was suspended on the outside of the building. Not only can the use of the floor as the matrix be seen as a process of recycling, but the individual prints are printed onto old stock so the previous images come through, providing the colour and pattern at random.

Kilpper’s strategy of taking a building as the starting point was most dramatically used in *State of Control*, where in this case the building was the former offices of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) in Berlin. Providing a visual equivalent to the opening up of the secret files, In this case, the building is made to reveal its dark secrets as he says “Of course it’s not about the floor but about what was organised on that floor: repression, surveillance destruction and war.”[[7]](#endnote-5) The final work addresses the street and what was before secret, is now made public. Kilpper broadens his canvas by including other examples of state oppression and references Afghanistan as well the plight of boat people. It is a mixed narrative and in one section we see Silvio Berlusconi about to be beheaded by the Dadaist and father of political photo collage, John Heartfield, a clear reference to a collage cut and paste approach to image making. The floor in this instance was linoleum so allowed for a greater fluidity of drawing than is possible with wood. As with *The Ring,* the offices have now become a pop up gallery for all the individual prints while outside the banner is presented to the street.

Kilpper would regard his work as a political act and his strategy as actions, within the tradition of Joseph Beuys. Beuys utilised printmaking and in particular the poster as a means of engaging with as wider public as possible. When asked why he made so many multiples his reply was disarmingly simple “ for me each edition has the character of a kernel of condensation upon which many things may accumulate. You see all those people who have such an object will continue to be interested in how the point of departure from which the vehicles started is developing. They’ll be watching to see what the person who produced these things is doing now. That way I stay in touch with people. “[[8]](#endnote-6)

Beuys’ uses the poster is a variety of ways. There are works, which essentially announce an exhibition or event, works, which capture moments in a performance or action, and there are works, which act as souvenirs or mementos. There is a consistent physicality about these works, a coarseness of the photographic image and a direct sense that Beuys is engaged through the image in capturing the audience. For an artist for whom much of his work had a temporary status, either as installation or the more fleeting performance or actions, the documentation provides a vital ingredient in ensuring that the audience has a visceral connection. The printed material, irrespective of whether it should be regarded as a fine art print or a poster, serves a common purpose of keeping his ideas in the public domain and confirms Beuy’s belief that “ The principle is that art today cannot be called art if it does not reach into the heart of our culture and initiate transformation…”[[9]](#endnote-7) All his work appears to represent a trace of action and thought and his cult status within the art world ensured that everything Beuys touched acquired value, from the mass-produced posters through to complex installations.

In Norway, Annette and Caroline Keirulf are two sisters who work as a collaborative partnership although retaining self-authorship of their individual artworks. As separate artists they view their overall enterprise as a joint one, sharing a common manifesto with the stated aim “to explore ways of developing woodcut, one of the oldest forms of printmaking and information technology, to become a contemporary medium for critical artistic practise.”[[10]](#endnote-8)

Their works take on the form of large-scale woodcut posters, hand cut and printed directly, with which they interrogate and reflect upon social and ecological issues, deliberately using the process of cutting the block to slow down the media barrage and through this process find space to assimilate. They take ideas out of the public domain into the home so for example issues such as ecology or economics are negotiated against a backdrop of domesticity and daily functions such as cooking. Their use of relief print to hand cut their messages contrasts with the anonymity and professionalised means of communication that we are the recipients of. This is both in terms of layout and typeface as well as the well-crafted newspaper slogan or the neatly packaged TV broadcast.

In the Kierulf's work there is an act of resistance against this professionalization of media, a desire to question and interrogate rather than merely consume. As Caroline Keirulf states “The texts I use are sometimes homemade and sometimes appropriated from different sources. The daily noise of contemporary propaganda inspires me. How we are exposed to different kind of voices that tell us what to believe, to desire, dream about and to fear.”[[11]](#endnote-9)

These prints carry all the signs of posters, image and text working together as a proposition, but rather than selling, their work interrogates and invites the viewer to join in the process of questioning.

Initiated in 2000, the project *Platform for Art* has commissioned artists to engage with the London underground to produce new works cited on the network. The network is sernonimous with the poster and in 2004 Mark Titchner produced new works for Gloucester Road Underground Station in the form of 10 large-scale billboard posters that play on the aspirational nature of the poster. The poster as a vehicle for persuasion was succinctly and poetical put by Bob Dylan in his 1965 song, Its alright Ma (I’m only bleeding)

Advertising signs that con you  
Into thinking you're the one  
That can do what's never been done  
That can win what's never been won  
Meantime life outside goes on  
All around you. [[12]](#endnote-10)

The series *I WE IT* takes a single phrase from the corporate vision of each of the world’s top 10 brands, as they were published in a randomly selected week.[[13]](#endnote-11) and presents them with the prefix I want, adding a threatening tone to what was otherwise an aspirational it not blandly pretentious slogan. Titchner uses the underground with its proliferation of posters many of which are from top ten companies, to ‘mess’ with the messages proposing a better world. The graphic employed references trade union banners, William Morris designs and I would suggest the psychedelic posters of the 1960’s epitomised by Martin Sharp’s *Mr Tambourine Man*, all of which carry with them a utopian vision of fairer society, a fare cry from the profit driven motives that fuel the multinationals. The Underground system is an ideal place to engage with an audience, the passengers waiting on the platform facing across at a gallery of images. The average time spent in front of a paintings in museums is lamentably short, measured in seconds, so one can see that a fixed audience contemplating an image even for 2 minutes in-between trains is relatively indulgent. A further example of Art on the Underground’s innovative commissioning policy can be seen in the posters of Jeremy Dellor who worked with those employed on the network to garnish quotations that reflected ideas about the city and its people entitled *What is the city but its people*. It is a philosophical proposition and made poignant by the passengers on the platform representing the city. Of course what also makes this project of interest is the random juxtapositions as the posters take their place alongside all the other posters, offering an interval, or an opportunity for unexpected irony.

The underground map itself is a poster on the network, still based on the original design by Harry Beck in 1933. In 1992, the conceptual artist Simon Patterson, who is concerned with the presentation of material and the way in which it is ordered, reworked the map, simply replacing names of stations with that of footballers, philosophers writers etc. each group were given their own line and a clever proposition emerges which for me begins to reflect thought patterns. The lithographic print entitled *The Great Bear* was otherwise a direct copy of the original map even down to the frame.

I wanted to conclude with a recent set of my own prints, made for an exhibition at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge. The exhibition considers the last journey by Captain Scott and his fatal attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole. The exhibition was the result of a year visiting the archives and researching the story. One aspect of the preparation for the expedition that chimed with me as an artist was the struggle to raise funds for the project, that familiar gap between aspiration and the resources needed to deliver. I discovered that Scott was reliant on a general appeal for support with schools funding anything from a pony to a sleeping bag. This set of prints explores that relationship and the way in which the general public as well as institutions engaged in the enterprise.

These prints function very much as posters in terms of delivering information in a visual form. In one print, an image of a sledge for example is surrounded by tags bearing the names sledges as given by the donors. I wanted to reference the example of placing nametags in clothes when children go away to school. Likewise with a print featuring a solitary pony where below in the border is a list of nicknames of the ponies which presented to the expedition by schools and others. Here I wanted to set up a contrast between the almost childlike sentimentality of the naming of animals as if they were pets, and the reality of the pony alone and destined for an inevitable early death. A further set of images, 13 in total to suggest the ill-fated journey were produced as postcards, the miniature form of the poster. Each image was a reconstruction of an arctic landscape made in the studio and photographed. Onto each was a word from Scott diaries describing conditions such as a Blizzard, a Glazier or Pack Ice.

The definition of what a poster is as apposed to a fine art print is of little interest to me. History shows that the cultural value of images changes, what was yesterdays throw away, becomes today’s prized object. The artists that I have discussed seem motivated by the desire to engage directly with a public and taken advantage of opportunities either to consider the poster as a means to go beyond the confines of the gallery or to explore the language of the poster. As a result, some of the finer qualities of printmaking, that attention to technique over content that José Roca warns against, are replaced by a sense of urgency and a desire to communicate.

1. Ratcliff, Carter (1983). *Warhol* New York, Abbeville Press Inc. p.38 [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Roca,José (2010). *The Graphic Unconscious.* Philografika, Philadelphia p.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Dietmor, Elgar (1997). *Felix Gonzalez –Torres Catalogue Raisonne*, Basel Cantz Verlag p.18 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. abid p14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. *Felix Gonzalez –Torres* interviewed by Robert Storr in ArtPress Jan 1995 p13 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Thomas Kilpper interviewed by Roca,José (2010). *The Graphic Unconscious.* Philografika, Philadelphia P162 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Thomas Kilpper interviewed by Clemens Krummel in *Thomas Kilpper, State of Control*, (2009) Berlin, Neuer Berliner Kunstverlag p.98 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. Joseph Beuys in Schellman, J,. & Kluser, B, *Joseph Beuys The Multiples*, Reisinger Museum, Busch, 1997 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. Joseph Beuys in Zumdick, Wolfgang (2013) *Death Keeps me awake. Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner. Foundations of their Thought,* Baunach AADR p124 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. Annette and Caroline Kierulf. *The Medium Is the Message: Woodcut as Cultural Critique* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. Caroline Kierulf in correspondence with Coldwell 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. Bob Dylan **"**It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)"1965 . Copyright © 1965 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. <http://art.tfl.gov.uk/projects/detail/1126/> accessed 21/5/2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)