

(Excerpt) **Respect the Margins: are millennials and lithography compatible?**

Reading Sherry Turkle's Together Alone over summer break was simultaneously an alarming and affirming experience. I am sure that I am not alone when I express concern regarding the unhealthy relationship that has developed between students and their cell phones. Turkle writes, "...technology, put in the service of always-on communication and telegraphic speed and brevity, has changed the rules of engagement with all of this. When is downtime, when is stillness?" (Turkle 172). Though I've seen students check their phones in the time that it takes for me to walk twelve feet from a desk to a whiteboard, it seems that there are actually two divergent trends arising within this generation – one which favors marriage to technology, an iPhone always tucked in the back pocket like a knowing partner, and one which diminishes technology's importance in favor of hand-crafted goods and face-to-face conversation. With the growth of online education, unending technological refinement, and dependence on digital networks, I wonder if we may become so saturated with all things digital that a longing for the human touch wins out.

Turkle writes of "sacred spaces," and in doing so gives those of us committed to tactile, process-oriented crafts reason to have hope. She researches how the notion of "sacred spaces" applies to those workers whose professions demand significant technological proficiency. Despite their extensive use of computer programs, architects, Turkle discovers, consider hand drawings to be sacred – "where the trace of the hand personalize[s] a building" (Turkle 277). Even faculty members in computer drafting courses send their students to traditional drawing classes when it becomes apparent that students are losing the skill of draftsmanship. As Turkle explains, "it was not about rejecting the computer but about making sure that designers come to it with their own values" (Turkle 277).

At a recent figure drawing session at my college, I met a marketing executive who works at a large and well-known ice cream purveyor in a nearby town. As a

former economics major with a love of drawing, he said that he usually could tell which members of the marketing department at his employer had taken art courses, suggesting that they were much better able to understand sensitivity to touch as it applies to a digital medium. The challenge confronting art professors like me is that students seek sacred spaces, Turkle writes, in these digital mediums – not art studios. Just as one must punch an ATM code or turn a key to unlock a diary, so, too, must one punch the correct numbers to open up the personal, digitized space of an iPhone. Perhaps sadistically on my part, what brings me joy in watching a student print a lithographic edition is seeing the student realize, in the dance of sponging and inking and reaching for sheet after sheet of pristine white paper, that she cannot access her phone or else risk sacrificing the hours of labor which preceded this final step in the process. More rewarding still is seeing the student realize that responding to a text is usually not worth that sacrifice.

What also gives me hope is the subgenre of Millennials we love to chide: hipsters. The website *The Awl* gathered references to the term from several years' worth of *New York Times* articles and compiled them into a dictionary of phrases. Included among the entries are: “droll expressions,” “furry faces,” “ironic smiles,” “straw fedoras,” and “women with Feist haircuts” – you know the type (Malady). In his article from last spring, *New York Times* writer Henry Alford decides to test drive the fashionable Brooklyn hipster lifestyle. He gets a straight razor shave, seeks out a wardrobe that will make him look like he “play[s] the banjo,” rents a fixed gear bike, and spends a weekend immersed in the artisanal food movement (Alford). While it is easy to scoff at the hipster’s emphasis on cultivating a certain highly visual persona that blends intellect, nostalgia, and mountaineer, Alford ultimately comes to realize that the twenty-something hipsters people love to ridicule for the aforementioned reasons often substantiate their presumed physical pretense with a genuine reverence for craft. This reverence for craft has led to the popularity of handicraft virtual marketplaces like Etsy. In 2012, Etsy unloaded almost \$900 million worth of crafts (Wolverson). The marketplace grew at such a pace that some sellers believed it had compromised its

grass roots origins. “These days, craftsmanship isn’t just about the quality of the work,” a *Time* magazine article states. “It’s also about selling a lifestyle as carefully calibrated as any Ralph Lauren scene of equestrian bliss” (Wolverson).

As he closes out his hipster experiment in Brooklyn, Alford reflects: “If every youth movement says as much about the status quo as it does about itself, then this new eco-conscious, agrarian-seeming, hair-celebrating nexus of locavorism is maybe telling us that the rest of us need to plunge our fingers into the rick loam of the earth, literally and metaphorically” (Alford). “Eco-conscious” might be a word worth dwelling on, as it reflects a mindset I have come to understand better since living and working among Millennials in Iowa. My suburban upbringing exposes its plastic sheen when I talk to people roughly my age who have strong desires to know their food sources better; many Millennials here tend gardens, aspire to raise bees, brew their own beers, and, at the very least, ride bikes to work. Meanwhile, I hop in my car and drive to the studio to teach art courses laden with solvents and soon-to-be-devoured stacks of paper.

Lithography and many other printmaking practices do not exactly check the “environmentally sound” box. It is difficult to avoid this issue – a red bin overflowing with solvent-soaked rags in the corner of the studio is hard to miss – so in the interest of transparency, I made a concerted effort last spring to confront it. I assigned Jason Workman’s revealing article, “Breathing Contemporary Art,” to my printmaking class. The Brooklyn he reveals is less charcuterie and urban farmers markets and more toxicity and environmental ambivalence. Workman spent part of 2007 working in a large “art fabrication studio” which served the needs of esteemed artists. Though his work concerned sculpture, the same issues of conscientious materials use and waste disposal apply to printmaking. Workman explains that he became increasingly bothered by the “general indifference” toward consumption and disposal of materials. “Art production,” he laments, “is seemingly indemnified from even a cursory mention of the notion of ‘art as pollutant’ among the industry’s numerous public platforms for

dialogue, and the best you are likely to hear from an artist is a mumbled apology as their work heads for the garbage” (Workman 521). In a time when it is fashionable to repurpose discarded materials and commute via bicycle, perhaps Millennial students will be the ones to make the most progress toward ecologically responsible visual arts practices.