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Your specialty is lithography, a method of printing that is well over 200 years old. What interests you about it?

It's the first printing method that enabled artists to reproduce their personal style. Letterpress printing and engraving are mechanical techniques: you have to carve into wood or copper plates. Then, suddenly it was possible to apply a stroke directly to the print medium with a pen or a brush. That was a revolution.

The integration of a personal style into the process of lithography has never ceased to fascinate me.

You look back on a century-old successful family business, J.E. Wolfensberger, which started out with a lithography printing press, studio, and art gallery all under one roof.

When my great-grandfather Johann Edwin Wolfensberger founded the business in 1902, he banked entirely on lithography. He was not only a very good printer—he trained with the extremely well-established printer Orell Füssli—he was also a clever and visionary businessman. He soon recognized the potential in printing pictures. The printing of text had already reached a very high level, given Johannes Gutenberg's 450-year lead. But until the invention of lithography, the production of pictures in color still had a long way to go. And my great-grandfather contributed substantially to changing that.

Did J.E. Wolfensberger also hire artists in his business?

Yes, he was passionate about art, and friends with many artists. It didn't take long for him to realize that if you want good pictures, you need good artists. On one hand, he employed artists on a permanent basis, like Otto Baumberger, who was skilled in designing posters and lithographs for advertising; on the other hand, he provided guest studios for the numerous artists from at home and abroad, who came to Zurich especially to do lithography. So from the start, my great-grandfather worked on the interface between commercial advertising and art. He was an early networker.

In the meantime, you and your brother Benni Wolfensberger are the fourth generation to operate the company, now with two independent entities: he runs the offset printing press in Birmensdorf and you the lithography printing press at Eglihofstrasse in Zurich. What did your training consist of and what factors influenced your career?

I grew up with my brother and my parents on the third floor of the building on Bederstrasse that also accommodated the business. So basically I grew up in the print shop and when people ask me about my training, I tell them that it was mainly there in the print shop. I was a bad student. The worst one in

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school, and the best one during recess. It was a very trying time for me and my parents. So I was especially pleased when I was accepted for the intro class at the School of Arts and Crafts in Zurich in 1981. I was extremely happy there because it gave me the chance to find out what I was interested in. It was an exciting time at school anyway with the AJZ (Autonomes Jugendzentrum Zürich) practically next door. It was a place where young people gathered to fight for change in cultural policy and for more accessible facilities. But personally, I wasn't unhappy in my bourgeois surroundings. The big shock was that everybody in school was very good at drawing. Drawing was the ultimate skill. So I made a quick decision and concentrated on color theory. That was what interested me and it also gave me the sense of security that I needed. After the intro course, I decided not to take the tests for the specialized courses and instead started a printing apprenticeship.

A consequential decision

In contrast to all the students who took the offensive, I cultivated a defensive strategy. I became more self-confident as a book printer. And now I've been standing at the machine for almost 40 years and I don't regret it for a single second.

Where did you do your apprenticeship?

I went to Druckerei Schnellert AG, a relatively small print shop in Zurich that trained both book printers and offset printers. Book printing was still very much a manual craft while offset printing was gradually making the transition from analog to digital. After my apprenticeship, I joined a big company in Sweden with 300 employees and shift work. Quite a contrast to my daily life in Switzerland. My mother is from Sweden, and my partner is, too, which explains the connection. I stayed for two years and had a great time. So I followed in my father's footsteps not only professionally but also in my choice of partner.

Why did you come back?

A concrete job offer from my father brought me back to Zurich. There was a vacancy in the lithography print shop; they needed someone to print the trial proofs. My father traveled to Stockholm with the head of the studio and offered me the job. As a result, I got to know the lithography stone inside out and also had direct contact with the artists. I am still grateful to my father for what he did. That was in 1988.

It sounds to me as if he was extremely respectful.

Yes, that is his style. He is very charming. He's the one who taught me that you can treat coworkers, customers, and suppliers that way as well. He inspired and impressed me not only as a person but also as a businessman.

What was the status of lithography in the early 1990s?

I was lucky because the lithography department was at a turning point. The heyday of classical original prints, art for the middle class, had come to an end. The medium still had a lot of potential and that gave me the freedom to change things. My father gave me the go-ahead and let me do what I wanted to.

What distinguishes you from other lithographers?

I have not acquired a distinctive idiom of my own. You can't recognize a Wolfensberger. A work by Shirana Shahbazi is supposed to look like Shirana Shahbazi, and John Baldessari like John Baldessari. Skilled craftspeople often take themselves too seriously instead of subordinating themselves to the work itself. My trademark is that I don't have one or that it is not visible.

Is there anything special that has influenced you?

I like being influenced. For example, Bernhard Luginbühl was a second father to me; he never minced words and he pushed me to do something because he realized how much potential there still was in lithography. So I started offering an annual workshop for young art practitioners. It was about rediscovering the medium of lithography. Artists like Dominik Stauch and Albrecht Schnider took the course. They'd never done lithography before. I realized pretty quickly that I had to give them carte blanche. The workshops taught me what artists need and I learned that it wasn't about implementing my ideas but rather those of the artists.

So you do not reproduce a pre-existing work in your studio; the work actually emerges on-site, at the machine?

An original lithographic print that is numbered and signed should be conceived for this specific medium. I expect artists to have an explicit idea in mind which they then carry out here in the lithography workshop. So the result is something that exists in this form and only in this form.

You are specialized in working with artists who come to you with extremely specific projects and often revisit the conventions of printmaking. How did that come about?

When I opened the lithography print shop and started giving workshops for artists, rigorous standardization in offset printing was snowballing at the same time. Efficiency and straightforward production was required in the interests of economizing. But I was interested in problems. A lot of artists came to me with specific problems related, for example, to the paper, the colors, or a transfer procedure. That was actually how the artist collaborations began. And the challenge of solving ever new problems has always been a pleasure.

What does it take to implement artistic visions, how do you find specific solutions?

I try to convert my personal voyeurism into empathy. That's the starting point: I am more than curious, it's actually an addiction, I'm a sponge and literally absorb the problem, whether it's something technical or chemical or whether it's a question of color. I am fascinated by artists who want to print a

color that doesn't exist yet. You can't just dump a problem on me; I don't solve problems by myself but I'm good at responding. It's through dialogue and teamwork that solutions are found.

What particular skills are required of you?
Most of all, drinking coffee and listening.

Can you describe an especially challenging project?
A good example is the collaboration with Michael Günzburger, who had been intent on figuring out how to render animal fur and hair. He used frottage, a print procedure that also works without a machine, and needed assistance to find out how the structure of hair could be reproduced as finely and minutely as possible. Our close collaboration ultimately turned into a friendship. His ambitious plan was to make a print of a polar bear in full scale. It didn't take long to realize that lithography or machine technology would not do the trick.

So how did you solve the problem?
The bear is practically twice as big as the maximum format of our stones, which is 120 x 80 cm (ca. 47 x 31.5"). So we had to switch to an aluminum plate which is possible when you do flat printing. The printing machine had to be enlarged as well. I myself would never have come up with the idea of building a large-format planographic printing machine. It has since come in handy in collaborations with other artists as well.
The project was a prolonged process. We didn't start straight off with polar bears. That was our final goal so to speak. On the basis of independent projects with 13 other, sometimes live animals and the structure of their fur, we solved very specific problems. And each time we learned something new. The total project went through a trundling development and took six years.

Was it really about a live polar bear?
We planned to work with a polar bear that had been sedated for scientific purposes. The special thing about the polar bear print, which was finally carried out in Spitsbergen, was that the transfer had to be done in Arctic temperatures and under time pressure. In the end we were able to work with a polar bear that had died a natural death, so that the time factor was no longer so vital.

Exactly how did the transfer take place?
It's a chemical procedure in which grease is one of the main components; temperature obviously plays a crucial role in the viscosity of the grease. To ensure a beautifully sharp print, we didn't want the printing ink to be too hard and not too smooth either. Black grease crayons, which are ordinarily used, were out of the question because they would have seriously compromised the bear's chances of survival. We finally ended up applying razor-thin layers of natural wool grease to the polar bear and then six of us put the bear on the film. The print was made only through the weight of the bear. And to fix the print of the hair on the film, we had to dust it with gold powder. That provided the image used to develop the aluminum plate.

Another project in collaboration with Cécile Wick wasn't carried out in the print shop either. How did that come about?
Cécile Wick had the idea of mounting a host of small works directly onto the wall, with no frame, no reflection, no distance. We devised a manual printing machine especially for the exhibition (SUB ROSA, Kunsthaus Grenchen, 2018). It enabled us to print directly onto the wall. I was practically the printing machine myself, along with the support of one of my coworkers. Sadly, since the pictures were temporary works of art, they disappeared when the exhibition closed. This vertical, direct printing process certainly has potential and would be an excellent means of permanently applying art commissioned for the walls inside a building.

You have enjoyed a long and fruitful collaboration with Shirana Shahbazi. How did that begin?
We printed wallpaper with silver pigment for Shirana Shahbazi as part of her site-specific installation at MoMA New York (New Photography, 2012). It served as the setting or rather background of the photographs she exhibited. Silver is a color that is associated with the analog development of photographs. It was an ideal and typical job, and the beginning of our ongoing collaboration on works in space. Later I printed a complete exhibition of photographic works with Shirana (Kunsthalle Bern, 2014) as well as editions for the Verein für Originalgrafik [Association of Original Prints]. We also share an interest in color concepts. I was particularly impressed, by the way, to see how carefully the American curators handled the wallpaper. Not only that, they bought two of them and thanks to instructions on the use of binders and metal pigments, they were able to produce a third one themselves. MoMA is really MoMA.

Have any projects ever failed?
Anything that doesn't meet our expectations does not go public. Not every print product is marketable. Obviously, you're also taking a risk when you keep trying out new things. It takes courage to break off a project and inevitably leads to the unpleasant question of who should defray the costs that have been incurred. In contrast to a project with a successful outcome, it is much harder to have everyone involved share the costs. So far, we've always found a good solution but it does put friendships to the test.

One of your greatest passions is color. You are an unrelenting critic of Pantone. Where does this passion come from?
Yes, in the meantime, the nickname "Anti-Pantone" has begun circulating in connection with my feelings about color. Basically I am never against, but rather for something. Let me make it clear that I'm not against that American company in anyway but rather an advocate of the proper handling of printing inks. The standardization of commercial

printing has led to a number of positive advances but also to a few setbacks. It's the most obvious in the case of printing inks. While the application of CMYK colors has practically been perfected, the proper use of special colors has nosedived. It's extremely rare to find someone in the arts who does not use Pantone's inadequate system of mixing colors.

Pantone colors have become incredibly popular in the graphic arts and commercial printing. What exactly are the shortcomings of this color system?

They use extremely reduced recipes, in other words, an extremely low-level economic compromise. It may do in some cases, but the gross deficiencies overall simply cannot be tolerated. Let me give you an example: Pantone's color charts distinguish between only two kinds of paper: coated and uncoated. This is even more astonishing since the colors are transparent, which means that the vehicle, usually paper, is an important chromatic component. And this is completely ignored although it's pretty obvious that the color temperature of paper influences a transparent color. Optical brighteners as well, the shininess of lacquer, or the texture of paper: they don't pay any attention to those factors either, but it just isn't that easy! Another example regarding the simplification in printing colors: black and transparent white are the only devices used to modify the Pantone charts. This has the advantage that certain colors don't react so strongly to variations in the lighting, in other words, they're not so susceptible to metamerism. But it also means being deprived of the fantastic wealth of colors, broken as complementary colors or simultaneously, or enhanced with white primer. You can't make books anymore like the ones Dieter Roth printed in the 1970s with his preference for brown. It's impossible. The fact that a lot of printers and designers delegate this color know-how to suppliers is certainly the wrong route to take.

Is there an ideal color chart?

Who am I to define an ideal color chart? I don't have the guts to work on an alternative model. But I do expect my artists to take a more active approach in handling color. Since a lot of artists come to me regularly, I can work out personal color charts with them. And, of course, that means you have to take the time to do it and you have to talk about color. We developed a palette of nocturnal colors with Zilla Leutenegger that has had a great impact on our collaboration. We don't slavishly follow any formulas but we now have an important frame of reference that helps in understanding the areas of light and shadow in her chromatic universe. And that increases the content of the colors.

What is the content of a color?

It's not just a matter of physics. If it were, you could just measure the nanometer value of the frequencies and that would define the color space. But we don't perceive color with our eyes; colors are processed in the cerebral cortex. By translating and bundling visual information in various ways, our brain converts the original physical impulse into an individual color phenomenon. The sense perception of color is a personal matter by definition and that's the way it should be treated. So print colors require customized supervision. The content of the color is defined by its application.

Exactly what colors do you use?

I don't buy pure pigments but basically ordinary printing inks like everybody else. I may know more suppliers and I have good contact with paint laboratories because I once took an evening course at a technical college and wrote a paper about special printing inks. All the courses in further education that I have taken over the past 40 years have been related to my special field. So I just order the basic colors. These are then enhanced, depending on the needs of the project, which means that I try to breathe life into them, to fine-tune a color in a certain way, for example, by making a warm red even warmer.

Let's talk about the project with Maximage at ECAL in Lausanne, which was part of Color Library, a major study about color. How was the workshop conducted?

It was based on Johannes Itten's theory of harmony, which is right up my alley. David Keshavjee and Julien Tavelli of Maximage showed great confidence in their students by confronting them with his approach to color. Every day for a whole week, the students showed up on the dot, eager to work at the printing machine. Together, we mixed, combined, and printed countless new colors, and they took everything in! We experienced some pretty exciting color moments. In contrast to conventional color charts, we printed larger surfaces for reference, juxtaposing two to four fields of color. And we didn't compare a light yellow with a dark yellow but rather a luminous orange with a saturated black. That also addresses a common problem: most color charts compare same with same. We printed the A2-sized sheets on site and produced a book of the same size in an edition of 500 copies. Although the individual book looks like an industrial project, there are obviously distinct differences. Incidentally, they published the 120 novel color combinations in book form and, practically overnight, the book turned into a must-have for designers and artists.

What does your workday look like, how much time do you spend with an artist?

Projects usually take a week. Then there are big projects that take several weeks, and smaller ones that take one or two days. As a rule, you take the time to develop something. That means having lunch together, which creates a more relaxed atmosphere. The New York artist Wade Guyton, who makes prints of his own on large Epson machines, booked an entire week; nothing happened the first three days. It was fascinating to see how much time he took to absorb the

atmosphere and watch us at work. Implementing the actual project only took the artist two days. It's not just productivity that counts: it's also important to give yourself time. Lithography is a slow medium, which was initially an economic disadvantage, but I have since recognized the advantages. Naturally, I'm fully aware that there are other art 'manufacturers' hired by artists to execute the end product. But in my case, the presence of the artist throughout the entire process is crucial to the quality of the final outcome.

What challenges does your profession face in the future?

I really wonder what the future will bring for our medium. It's totally unpredictable. We are facing a new wave of manual craftsmanship in the context of contemporary art. That makes me very optimistic and I have confidence in artists who take a more tentative approach instead of coming up with all the answers, artists who want to work together at finding a solution. That's related to the project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. An institution like the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) senses that we have to start thinking with our hands again.

The prize comes at a time when scientific research has become interested in your specific manual practice. What is this about? How do you explain the interest?

Digitalization and standardization have been in the spotlight for a long time and the pendulum is slowly swinging in the other direction again. That is a very general and necessary backlash. But it is remarkable that pure basic research has chosen to get involved. I actually do project research and would never be able to afford basic research. Project research is always applied and related to a goal. The research project at ZHdK is called "Hands-on"; the intention is to study the dialogue between printers and art practitioners, and to document the manual skills. It's an open-ended project. An important project. I can't say much about it except that I'm the artisan who is under observation.

You received your first prize, the Peter Kneubühler Graphic Arts Prize, in 2014 from the Peter Kneubühler Foundation in Zurich, in recognition of the great contribution that you and your company, Wolfensberger Lithographic Printers AG, have made in the field of lithography. At first, you felt a little uncomfortable about being awarded the Swiss Grand Award for Design because you don't like being in the limelight. What does the award mean to you?

My original reservations have given way to great pleasure. I've been printing without interruption for almost 40 years and it feels good. Somehow, you try to justify the award to yourself. Now I accept it. I'm so grateful to all the artists who came to me with problems. Without their projects and uninhibited questions, my work would not have developed in this direction. The award couldn't have come at a better time. I need it and I already know what I'm going to do with it.

What are you looking forward to?

The next project. The next project is always the most important one!