Fulcrum

THE AA'S WEEKLY FREE SHEET

25

ISSUE TWENTY-FIVE: OCTOBER 26, 2011. TOPIC: PRINT & MEDIA.

NEW YORK.

followers.

c.davidson

After Steve Jobs died in early October, among the articles about the technological devices he had developed for Apple was one about the evolution of contemporary culture. Matt Bai, writing in the New York Times, said Jobs saw that we were "breaking away from the last era's large institutions and centralized decision-making" and that (information) technology would free us from the traditional limits of the workplace and the marketplace. This new freedom is clearly seen by many today as empowering both the individual seeking a podium and mass movements such as the Arab Spring and, now, Occupy Wall Street seeking to organize. But one is only empowered by the quality of the information one either dispenses or receives, and then by what one does with it.

As editor of Log, a magazine more invested in publishing critical writing about architecture and the city than in relaying "information," I decided to compare the popularity of some of the digital sources that report on architecture today with traditional architecture magazines based on their respective social networking activities (see below). My brief survey was flawed because there was no easy access to statistics such as age, gender, or nationality – important factors in thinking about the future of the digital versus print magazine. Neither did I assess the quality of the content, which clearly ranged from the useful, to gossip, to the self-promotional. But the findings – the numbers – still indicate that easy access to digital "content" poses a serious challenge to print.

Most magazines today have websites on which they reproduce printed content. Some send current and potential subscribers daily e-mails linked to "news" stories; they also have Facebook pages and Twitter accounts in an effort to expand their readership (and advertising base). Together these create a sense of urgency that belittles the slowness of the monthly publication. Webzines, which update daily, also use Facebook and Twitter (and other social networks) to curry followers. Will the digital versions of magazines overtake the printed products themselves? Or will they succumb to the Webzine and the unedited blog? What does it mean when Paul Goldberger, a long-standing New York architecture critic now writing for The New Yorker, has 591 Twitter followers and Rem Koolhaas, who seldom tweets, has more than 26,000? Will the "filter" of the editor or critic have future value or is there a high tolerance level for useless information?

Steve Jobs always refused to work with focus groups for product development, a position I also strongly endorse as a magazine editor. He said, "It is not the consumers' job to know what they want." In this way he changed the music industry and left a legacy with the potential to change the publishing industry as well – it's coming fast. But when Log has 300 Facebook likes and the website ArchDaily has more than 380,000, one has to wonder not only about the future of print, but also, based on the present content of both of these sources, the cultural evolution of architecture, and of architectural thought, itself.

Cynthia Davidson is editor of Log & director of Anyone Corporation.

Magazine	*Facebook "likes"*	*Twitter followers*
Abitare	*36,013*	*N/A*
Domus	11,709	11,713
Log/Anyone	*308*	*N/A*
MARK	12,678	1,732
Volume	*3,512*	*3,923*
Architect	11,709	27,137
Websites		
Archdaily	*380,532*	*49,910*
Archinect	15,544	17,443
Architizer	*389,536*	*20,684*
Design Observer	52,226	390,831
World Arch. News	*N/A*	*5,888*

Correct on Oct.5, 2011.

LONDON.

potential value.

g.baldwin

Virtual media presents us with access to our most immediate desires. It bypasses our impatience with hierarchical information sources and strips the medium of both criticality and authority. Instead of these qualities, virtual media captures our attention by the modes it uses to disseminate information, and the patterns by which we consume it. While available statistics have a tendency to obscure the true nature of virtual media, the reality is nonetheless evident: a culture weighted by implied significance, and content measured by the quantity of its subscribers versus the actual quality of material. There are exceptions to this, notably highly specific (or niche) interests, but the time required to locate high-quality sources within the virtual realm is inversely proportionate to the precision the searcher requires. In other words, the more specific the information you're looking for the longer it takes, thereby exposing the inefficiency inherent in non-centralised media.

But aside from the structures and performance of virtual media, there exists the entity of which the virtual is encapsulated. Virtual information is consumed through various interfaces ranging from mobile phones to computers, entities that Baudrillard would come to define as technological objects. What these objects actually represent is not the value or the quality of the content of which they are capable of generating or accessing, but the image of owning such devices. From this perspective, the content that we read or consume on a regular basis is objected to an apparatus, which we use to further promote the representation of our own self-identity. This point is made not to bring attention to our own identity, but to establish what substance is actually lost in virtual media.

Let us now step back and look at print media. The physicality of print media presents us with a direct representation of the object value. This is not to say that the value is determined by the possession of such an object by an individual, but more to suggest its value within a larger context. Although print media is increasingly regarded as redundant and almost unnecessary against virtual tides (due to the issue of time and immediacy), its representation as an object bears greater significance against the representation suggested by that of the technological object.

The technological object is diluted through the infinity of its capabilities and through the subject of which it is attached or interfaced. Although aesthetically speaking, such power is attractive to individuals as a signifier of class and cultural standing; the true value of its content is generalized into a single entity, stripping potentiality away from the power suggested by the entity itself.

Considered in this respect, print media will always remain more valuable, as each object is a representation of a specific knowledge, or conserves the potential for such knowledge to be activated. Although the possession of print media is subjected more to the owner's individuality, the identity of the object moves beyond an image of ownership and self-image, to a greater knowledge, which has the potential to be activated specifically across a wider range of individuals.

This recognition of differentiation across the potential of both media platforms will stand against the measure of time and the impact of technological development as an indication of authenticity. The question of its presence against architectural thought will find its ground not in the inclination of collectivity, but in the individuals capable of removing themselves from a reactive discourse disclosed subconsciously in the virtual world.

Graham Baldwin edits Fulcrum.

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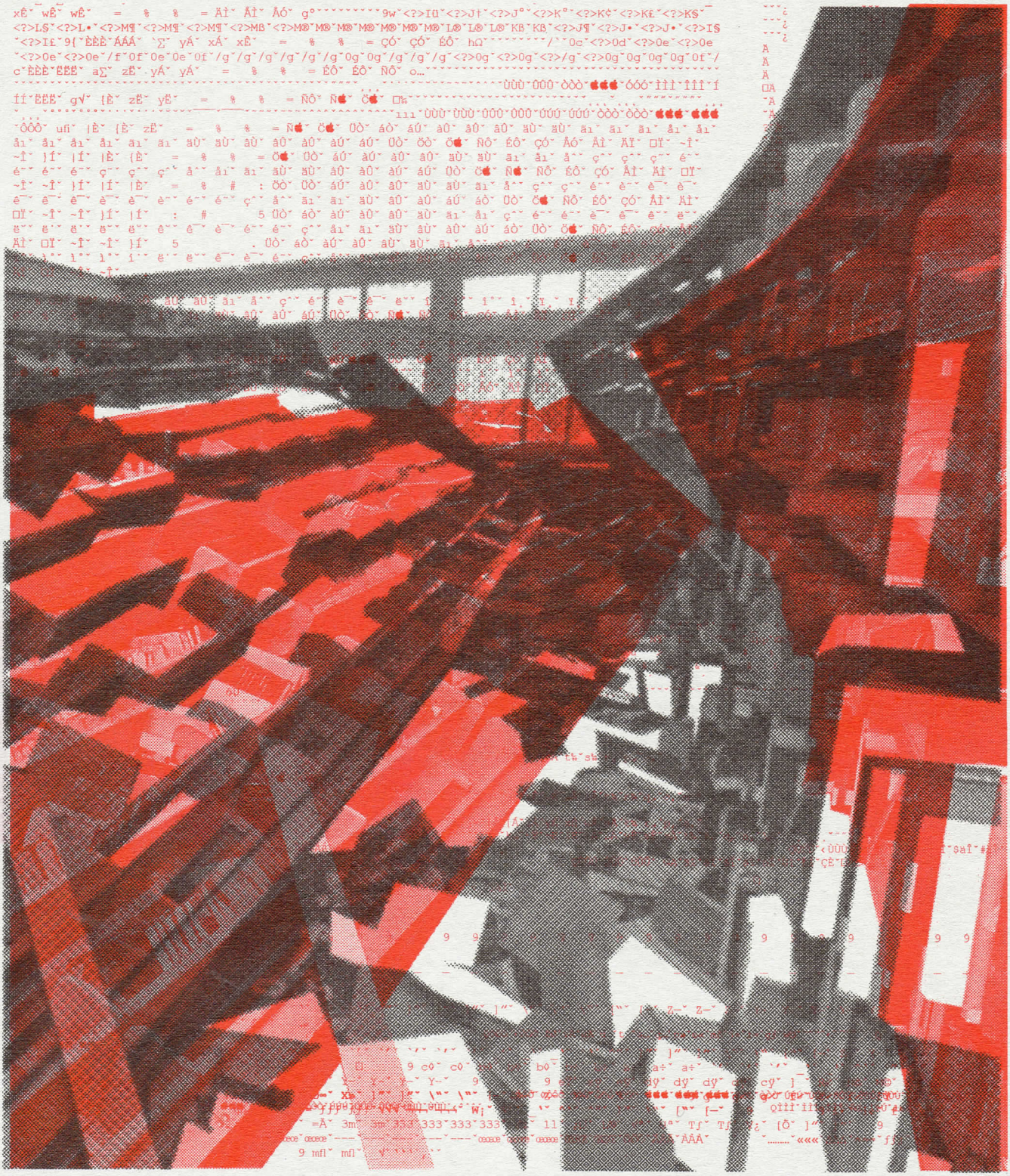

CHRISTCHURCH.

This week Fulcrum asked two New Zealand graphic desigers to produce a 'third article' (in the spirit of H.U. Obrist & R.Koolhaas' recent 'trialogues') to take the form of an image-based response to the topic: "Rather than focusing on the loss of potential of printed/digital formats, we explored the different lives each type of publishing leads. We decided to focus on print media as having more of a 'life' as an object; it can end up in strange and unexpected places, trade hands, become misplaced, damaged... an object that very much exists within the world. Digital media, however, is protected from most of these incidences — we engage with this type of publishing through a screen rather than handling an object and it usually remains in a stable location.

In the composite above, the black layer is a photo of Christchurch City Library shortly after the earthquake earlier this year — we thought it was a great image to illustrate the idea of printed objects being subject to chance. The red layer is the code, or information, a computer uses to store a digital version of such an image. The contrast between chaos and organisation inherent in the two different media is presented through an overlaying process, a visual dialectic."

Sophie Davis & Grace Campbell are editors of the design magazine Millennium Falcon.