

## **BLOCK PRINT REVISITED (v.6)**

1977 Original film

1997 Block Print Revisited (v.1) text with sketches

2005 Color video document for the "Trikraum : Spacetricks" exhibit in Zurich

2017 HD movie/composition

At a certain point in time a particular filmmaker who lived in New York City made a film. His earlier films were pleasingly self-conscious cartoons. But by 1977 he felt ashamed of his artistic lineage: all those smirking animals overstating the racist, sexist, violent values of our culture. He was tired of the synthetic space and time of animation. He wished to venture into the new territory of "real space," uncontaminated by hyperbole, compression, the idiosyncrasy of hand-drawn animation. But, later, at a certain point in time, it had all turned out to be "virtual space."

On a purely ego-aggrandizement scale he wanted to make a film that would be suitable for presentation at the Whitney Museum, the well-known Madison Avenue art bunker designed by Marcel Breuer. Its gloomy, windowless facade and barrier moat suggested an invincible fortress of high-seriousness, even hostility — in those days he often thought they amounted to the same thing. The Whitney film curator had so consistently rejected his animated films that he assumed THEY were at fault. Perhaps a film more in line with the current canon, "structural film," would be the appropriate route.

Concurrently he was making and printing books of drawings which appeared to move when the pages were flipped. He called them "flipbooks," not "flip-books," to claim for them a unique status, not just a subset of "books," as some spell checks still maintain. These ephemeral, lowbrow works sold (at prices on a par with comic books) as "artists books" in stores like Printed Matter which had sprung up on the fringe of Soho; they were rarely seen outside a small circle of friends and colleagues. On his flipbook agenda was the production of a round book whose pages were bound by a single pin at the axis, a "phenakistobook." This idea gave way to a "mutoscope," with pages bound in a spool, like a Rolodex. While gliding through these lofty speculations it seemed reasonable to use the pages as frames, automatically captured by a movie camera in "real time," then re-cycled as something else,

somewhere else. One such "somewhere" was the Hackett Carhart Building nine blocks North on Broadway where the American Mutoscope Company had produced circular flip-books from 1895 until 1900 when the company switched to motion picture film (exhibited on a kinoscope) and became the The Mutoscope Biograph Company.

The filmmaker lived nearby on East 4th Street, on a block between Lafayette and the Bowery. Across the street from his loft stood an exceptional Federal house with a slate roof, a tree planted in front, and a working cistern in the backyard — a well-preserved reminder that the neighborhood was once home to the Astors and Vanderbilts. But instead of inventing a spatial narrative based on the exceptional residences of patricians, he ventured further west toward a block bordering what city planners referred to as the "Broadway Corridor." This block contained once-grand late 19th century commercial buildings, now slouching aimlessly toward a graffitied decrepitude. Here, marginal industries such as hat makers, book binders, and janitorial supply wholesalers, were tenaciously holding their own among boarded-up ground floor retail spaces.

Here, where ladies once shopped for gloves, thick skins of ripped posters advertising rock concerts and downtown theatre events were peeling off the sheet metal armor of abandoned stores. Here, even his bank looked seedy, bordering a demolition site masquerading as a parking lot. Here, Hispanic garment workers lined up giggling on Fridays to deposit their paychecks from doomed businesses. Here was a tempting stew of commerce, memory, and invention. Ruins had always fascinated him. They weren't just buildings, symbols of order and function; they were narrative artifacts. One could feel optimistic in their presence. Survival is possible. Life goes on. The city proves it by its continual death and rebirth.

Prince among the ruins was the Schermerhorn Building, designed in 1888 by Henry Hardenbergh, who also designed the Dakota and the Plaza Hotel. Its Neo-Romanesque brownstone and polished granite ground floor was now occupied by an angry printer/commercial stationer, his stock of erasers hard and dusty, his notebooks yellowed, and his clattering presses operated by sullen young men in undershirts. The block also featured Shinbone Alley, indelibly associated with Archie and Mehitabel, creatures of the

cartoon world he was attempting to forget. Maybe this backdoor street, anomalous in a city curiously devoid of alleys, had in an earlier age contained loading docks for mule-drawn wagons, havens for Jacob Riis robbers, Runyonesque gamblers, loafing Whitmanesque dandies. Now, its primary use was as a urinal for numerous derelicts, refugees from the Bowery, who sat on the curb muttering incoherently.

Well, he made the film, but what was it?

Underground

Experimental

Avant-Garde

Independent

Structural

Animated

Documentary

Installation

20 years later, he came to see what was not clearly evident in the late '70s: the miracle of real estate speculation. The block he had chosen for its squalor, for its picturesque ruins, for the melancholia of its own horrid neglect, had become "Noho," a winking reference to Soho, the neighborhood of premier galleries, now established as the landmark cast-iron district South of Houston Street.

Maybe the first signs were the scaffolding, the double-glazed replacement windows, the trucks laden with sheetrock and ductwork. More obvious were multiple posters proclaiming the future home of the largest record store in the world. "Sure" he thought. "Sure" the derelicts muttered incoherently. But then right next door, seemingly overnight, sprouted a Pottery Barn, shelves stocked with brightly colored kitchen necessities.

It should not have come as a great surprise. New York University had already completely overhauled the block across the "corridor," discarding the hat store, the aged cabinet maker and his dog, while installing in their place various national chain stores: discount drugs,

cheap shoes, fast food, a kind of Noho mall. Of course, as a properly marginalized artist, he had been repelled by this retail renaissance and the new, affluent class of gentrifiers who lived with their compact disc players and VCRs high up in shiny-floored luxury condos. "Holy Shit! A goddamn doorman on East 4th Street!" the derelicts muttered.

Every afternoon, where once the Richard Bauer Co. transacted its orderly business of buying and selling pallets of wholesale cardboard, all recorded in ledgers, invoices, and bills of lading, now stood the pink and brown gourmet Mexican restaurant with young professionals at the sidewalk cafe chatting up each other over frozen margaritas. Every day, serious young women with dyed hair and nonchalantly bizarre clothing entered and exited his old bank building, now a school for professional models. The brownstone and ochre brick facade of the Prince of Ruins enjoyed perhaps the grandest and most contrived interior reincarnation as a post-modern sushi bar duplex with gold leaf stenciling on arched windows and free-standing slabs of gleaming stainless steel sculpture.

Where the filmmaker had seen romantic ruins, hidden architectural secrets, and the complex ethnic mix of last-gasp industries, others evidently had seen a splendid opportunity for real estate investment, dovetailed neatly with the hearty pioneering spirit of capitalism. He had himself become a willing member of this landowning class, even though he still had no legal right to reside in his loft building. Still, how could he feel bitter living among these *arrivistes*? Wasn't it convenient to pick up a soy latte in the morning? Or stock up on toilet paper while shopping for fresh greens in the evening? Not to mention perusing alphabetized shelves, arranged by genre, to discover a rental disc of the latest re-make of a Hollywood classic?

Even before the block's transformation, the derelicts had already migrated from Shinbone Alley to find refuge near 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, close to the odorous meat-packing markets, the abandoned Westside elevated freight railway, and the raucous hangouts of transvestite hookers.

### **Block Print as a Process**

He rarely includes “Block Print” in a program of his films. “Lineage” strains most audiences’ patience with its serious voice-over explanations and its 29 minute duration. “Block Print” is 17 minutes of silence: common on the “avant-garde” film circuit familiar with Brakhage and Frampton, but anathema to the animation world.

First, there is an introduction: a close-up of an early map of the block (bounded by Broadway, West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Lafayette Street, and Great Jones Street), whose sides are traced by a finger (his). The film is divided into 4 parts, divided by black leader and a numerical title signifying a shift in process. The first is a “walk around the block,” shot in real time with a hand-held camera focused on the seam between the sidewalk and the buildings. Visible are doorways, facades, and the occasional pedestrian. The B&W Tri-X reversal stock imparts a granular air of documentary authenticity.

In Part 2 the original film is manipulated: the frame is turned on its side to show more data, then its duplicate is offset and “bi-packed” with the original. This produces an abstract, accelerated version suggesting the film medium as a mechanical process created at a laboratory without direct, manual intervention. The 16mm film is copied again, this time on a Xerox microfilm printer onto a roll of paper. The technician is filmed to show the materials and machinery. The paper stock is heavy weight, not commonly used for duplicating paginated documents. The roll is then mounted on a reel and separated, by hand on a guillotine paper cutter, at each frame-line.

Part 3 documents the cutting the process using an animated, time-lapse strategy, shot in color, to capture hands and blade in chaotic, random disorder, yet rendering the original action as a continuous progression. The title is first shown upside down, then, when the camera point of view is flipped, right-side up.

The concluding part organizes the Xeroxed pages in the lower foreground surrounded by the actual space which was shot in Part 1. The pages are registered and held in place as they are carried around the block while being manually flipped and shot frame by frame. The juxtaposition of these layers, photographic film and paper duplicate, follows the original route which was recorded a few weeks before. The background layer jiggles and bounces,

with brightness and contrast often at odds with the foreground pages, but with an observable continuity. The animated circumnavigation ends where it began, at the corner of Lafayette and Great Jones Streets: the Schermerhorn Building. The single-frame animation camera is switched to continuous recording; it is removed from its fixed position and is hand-held to pull back to reveal the mutoscope: a reel of 279 pages bound as paper spokes on a wheel which is mounted on a film re-winder affixed to a plywood cart. The camera encircles the mutoscope at rest. As a coda, the reel is cranked rapidly into a rotational blur, obliterating all content in favor of movement itself







