Peer review of a dissertation thesis

Zhu Guanchu: "Print Creation Research with Digital Technology – Transformation of Sign Language Symbols"

Written by Prof. PhDr. Zbyněk Janáček, Czech Republic

Mr **Zhu Guanchu** (born 10 March 1989 in Lishu, Jilin province, China) graduated from the Bachelor's and Master's programme at the Academy of Fine Arts, Northeast Normal University in Changchun, China; since 2015, he has been studying for his PhD. in Fine Art at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art, Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław. In 2018, he organised an individual exhibition in Changchun, China and in 2012–2018 joined about 32 collective exhibitions in Poland and abroad (China, Taiwan, Serbia, Armenia, North Korea, Mexico, France), receiving awards from many of them. His work is represented in the collections of Chinese galleries and art museums: National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Jilin Art Museum, Changchun, Heilongjiang Art Museum, Heilongjiang, Beijing Culture Art Center, Beijing, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan. In 2017, he was the artist in residence at Ambition Printmaking Studio in Changchun, China, and is quoted in numerous printed and electronic publications. He works with graphics, photography and digital media; in addition to traditional outputs, he has also created experimental video art (Silent Lies, Digital and Experimental Images, 2016, 6 minutes 10 seconds), experimental prints, combined techniques, work using a microscope etc.
Guanchu Zhu concluded his PhD. studies of Fine Arts at the Faculty of

Graphics and Media Art, Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design with the dissertation titled *"Print Creation Research with Digital Technology-Transformation of Sign Language Symbols"*.

His tutor is Dr hab. Aleksandra Janik, prof. ASP. Mr Guanchu Zhu has submitted his dissertation thesis "Print Creation Research with Digital Technology" which consists of a theoretical part, 53 pages in length, and numerous reproductions and examples illustrating the text as well as Art Cases supplemented with the author's own work, a bibliography following the standard for quotations, a list of illustrations and a list of printed and electronic references. The next part of the thesis is the Portfolio of the author's graphic cycles from 2015–2018: Wood Language (2015), Food Safety Series (2016) and Sign Language (2016–2018); there are also examples of other occasional work (Others: Dream Box, 2016, Lotus Root, 2016, Drunk, 2017) including an example of applied graphics (Ex Libris Life001–003, 2018). The theoretical part of the dissertation thesis *"Print Creation Research with Digital Technology"* subtitled *"Transformation of Sign Language Symbols"* is divided, besides the opening (Introduction) and closing (Summary) chapters, into three sections: Basic Definition of Digital Technology and Creative Printmaking, p. 7–11, Analysis of Digital Print Creation, p. 12–24, and finally an Analysis of Specific Works "Sign Language Symbols", about 10 pages long (25–33). I'm discussing the content structure in more detail mainly because, as I intend to show below, given the focus of the thesis and the ratio which should be skewed towards the author's own work, the theoretical section seems rather imbalanced. While this analysis is quantitative in nature, it also generates some qualitative and content-related questions. The "optical" core of the thesis (in

terms of size) are the second chapter and the third, which in its own way is the author's attempt to examine the relationship between digital and traditional print, understandably through the lens of technology. In my opinion, this is a discourse that had already been concluded, at least in the contemporary European and American context. But I understand that this may seem like a live topic for the author, given that the Asian countries have so far been quite resistant to accepting digital technologies in graphics. This explains why the author feels the need to sort through the material and gather the data because the discourse is for example in his homeland very much unresolved and the traditional approaches to graphics are still "fighting" against new media. This for instance means that digital paintings are rejected from exhibitions, competitions etc. This is a parallel to the restrictions that serigraphy experienced some decades ago, see The International Print Triennial – Kraków. In his thesis, Zhu Guanchu clearly aims to defend new media and electronic images in art. The reason for this approach is certainly generational, which is very natural, but we should not neglect also the educational influence of one of the best art universities in Europe and finally, which I think is most important, the experience of an artist and a creator who fully understands the potential of new technologies. But, and this needs to be emphasised, while also being knowledgeable about traditional printing technologies. I'm sure that the Wrocław academy cultivated the young postgraduate and helped him find his bearing in new trajectories; in the school's workshops, he absorbed the necessary ethos backed with theoretical knowledge and supported through research, discussed and confronted at many specialised international conferences and symposia and refined in the atmosphere of studios and workshops. There is also the phenomenon of the Polish graphical tradition, the Wrocław tradition, the Kraków triennale and Polish national triennale as well as many international shows which thankfully no longer worry about technology but consider all works to be part of the medium of graphics. This holistic approach is unmissable, and it seems clear that Zhu Guanchu was a perceptive student. The Faculty of Graphics and Media Art in Wrocław has a tradition of seeing graphics as a very open medium and this approach has been developing there very naturally, shaped by the hands of many artists and theoreticians. To be honest, however, even though I am well aware that the theoretical part is not the core of the dissertation thesis, which is clearly in the student's own work, particularly the second and third chapters are clearly beyond the author's powers – if not as a whole, then undoubtedly in some parts. The arguments used by Zhu Guanchu to support his entirely undisputable conclusions are quite general and have been heard often; they hardly enrich the usual and somewhat stale discourse. The reader's knowledge is not extended beyond familiar horizons and nothing is proven; instead, the author repeats what is already known. Examples of various works of art seem random and very scattershot in terms of content and technology; I'm missing among them many authors particularly from the middle and young generation. (I don't think it's necessary to repeat in the Polish environment the example of the highly respected and often quoted work of E. Boskovic. And if so, it should be done in a broader intergenerational context.) The structure of the chapters is also rather chaotic, and some sentences even appear twice (!); the development of the graphical medium is presented in such a simplified manner that it would have probably been better to not do it at all. On the other hand, the sections discussing new technologies would benefit from a more systematic and precise approach. I believe that these shortcomings originate with the student's too ambitious plans and too broadly defined topic. The

thesis would likely be improved if it had a narrower focus because this breadth does not play to the author's strengths; instead, it often results in empty phrases, general statements etc. I have decided to interpret the term "research" used in the title of the thesis rather as "investigation" or "comparison" because otherwise I would have to criticise the lack of quantitative and qualitative methods typical for research. I choose to believe that the word "research" was something of an exaggeration because that would be far too ambitious an objective and one that remains unfulfilled. Repeated definitions of digital art, digital graphics and digital print are heavily simplified and seem geared towards a specific purpose, vaguely resting on other assuredly good literature presented by the author. I believe that one of the issues is the repeated emphasis on technologies (which is logical) and too little attention paid to content; there are few theory-backed arguments explaining the differences and similarities between traditional and new media. And while discussing graphics, I regretfully have to note another criticism I have which concerns sources. The lack of Polish theoreticians in the entire theoretical section of the dissertation seems to me inexcusable and regretful. This is because many of the issues discussed by the author have been sufficiently reflected by other authors, including those writing in English, such as Dorota Folga-Januszewska (see the catalogue of the latest Polish Print Triennial, Katowice, 2018), Marta Raczek (e.g. The International Print Triennial 2018, Immersed in Images, 2018) or S. Dudzik.

In the interests of objectivity, however, I must note that I understand that the theoretical part of the dissertation thesis is neither its pinnacle nor its objective; it's only a tool used for reference. From this perspective, chapters 1–3 can certainly be accepted. They are compiled from the work of others and inspired by others; they lack independent thinking and tell us little about the issue that has not yet been known. They do not expand our knowledge. But that would perhaps be a too lofty ambition. They undoubtedly represent an educated overview of an issue (albeit one defined too broadly); these chapters are essentially a preparation, a propaedeutics, for the fourth chapter and the practical work.

The fourth chapter, Analysis of Specific Works "Sign Language Symbols", however, is completely different and the only criticism I have is that it's far too short compared to the previous three; in the light of this chapter, the preceding parts seem superfluous – I do not want to say unnecessary because the author clearly invested a lot of effort into writing them. I regret the brevity of chapter four because "sign language symbols" is a very interdisciplinary topic which requires both from the author and from the reader a deeper insight into semiotics, general linguistics and theory of communication as well as language acquisition. This is of course closely related to the more general issues of sign language (Note: *A sign language is a communication system consisting of specific visual-movement signs, i.e. hand shapes, positions and movements, facial expressions and positions of the head and upper body. Sign languages arose spontaneously in communities of the hearing-impaired and here they are continuously developed further. This community includes the hearing-impaired as well as interpreters and friends and family members of the hearing-impaired. Sign languages are also used by people with speech impediments, such as some types of aphasia.*)
This part is mere three pages long, even though a more detailed examination of this issue would undoubtedly strengthen the position of the practical part of the thesis which has indisputable visual qualities but whose accompanying text has many problematic sections that prevent me from being unreservedly enthusiastic.

As mentioned, Zhu Guanchu's portfolio mainly consists of three comprehensive graphical cycles: *Wood Language* (2015), *Food Safety Series* (2016) and *Sign Language* (2016-2018). Each of them is an independent, masterful and convincing proof of the author's ability to develop the selected issue in terms of content, i.e. by selecting the right topic, and in terms of form, even though I found the formal aspect or rather the presentation of the first cycle somewhat baffling (see below). I have to note that all of these remarks are made with the sincere regret that my time and work constraints prevented me from seeing the entire work in its original form and I had to make do with the limited portfolio, electronic presentations etc. But I do acknowledge that the author's graphical work fully and entirely fulfils the objective declared in the title of the thesis, namely to find a corresponding technological solution for the specific content. The idea of assigning the right form to content may seem banal and overdone, but because the process of achieving this harmony is still far from obvious, it is necessary to keep discussing these issues further. Zhu Guanchu does so in his cycles *Food Safety Series* (2016) and *Sign Language* (2016–2018) so thoroughly and unambiguously that his art practice confirms how unnecessary the constantly interrupted discourse between technologies is. And if it's not entirely unnecessary, it's at least academic. Zhu Guanchu's work responds to various topics such as endangering health through contaminated food or deliberate use of additives that are common in the chemical industry but dangerous in human food – there were cases in China, Austria, Italy etc. where such chemicals caused irreversible damage to health and in China even the death of many children. Explorations of the topic of death through images obtained by microscope (*Waste Oil*) resemble similar tendencies in contemporary art, e.g. the work of D. Hirst. They also expand our perception through digital technology, which is one of the author's arguments in the preceding chapters. The *Sign Language* (2016–2018) cycle examines sign language and with it the issues of communication and information sharing; sign language is for the artist a way to explore different cultural contexts and seek common ground. He also uses the Chinese character-based writing system to connect cultural and social content. The commendable aspect of both cycles is that in his relationship with our reality and the neuralgic issues of our time, Zhu Guanchu does not succumb to unnecessary activism and even though the *Safety Series* cycle in particular is quite striking and turbulent, it never loses its artistic quality despite its clear social dimension. In the *Sign Language* cycle, the artist is trying to find analogies between paintings originating from sign language and old Chinese characters, based on shape more often than meaning. And even though Zhu's new poetic compositions are often a little too aesthetising, the expansion of their meaning with new content and the forging of links between the world of the hearing-impaired and the world of an ancient non-European culture make them quite striking and, similarly to the previous cycle, very powerful. The author started with photographs of individual sign language words which he manipulates in a bitmap editor: layering them over each other, multiplying, tweaking their transparency, sometimes flipping and mirroring them. Sign language communication occurs in real time and these approaches represent an opportunity to restore this lost time dimension to the image through other means. This frozen process is however not the artist's objective, but rather a means for manipulating the image further and using the basic format of Chinese calligraphy to finalise the work through serigraphic printing. The character grid as a geometric element gives his work a new optical quality and relativises the already mentioned aesthetisation because the structure of the grid and the character refer back to the content. Zhu's

approach is sophisticated; the concept is excellently thought out and highly functional and its result is a celebration of the graphical language that he chose. His work, after all, is proof that even if the theoretical background may be questionable, what matters most is the artistic output! (Note: *The term <u>sign speech</u> [znaková řeč] appears in many texts ranging from fiction and journalism to specialised papers, but is very unfortunate. In translated texts, this may be because dictionaries list this as the (only) correct option; for example the Seznam dictionary wrongly states that the French langage des signes should be translated as "sign speech of the deaf-mute" [znaková řeč hluchoněmých], the German die Zeichensprache is claimed to be "gesture speech of the deaf-mute" [posunková řeč hluchoněmých], the Italian lingua dei segni is translated as "gesture speech" [posunková řeč] and the Spanish lengua de señas as "sign speech" [znaková řeč]. Only the English dictionary gives the correct option "sign language" [znakový jazyk]; the Italian dictionary offers it as a second variant. These translated texts however definitely do not mean "sign speech" [znaková řeč] which is, as mentioned above, a term defined by Czech law that includes various aspects and is specific for the Czech environment. Specific sign languages such as the American Sign Language (ASL) and langue des signes française (LSF) should only ever be translated as (American, French…)* **sign language** *[znakový jazyk]. The same mistakes appear also in Lingea dictionaries. It is surprising how common these wrong translation variants are given that English, for example, only ever talks about sign language, not sign speech.*)

In the Wood Language cycle from 2015, Zhu explores this issue with a rather surprising approach in which the prints are adjusted to wood chips. I do not know if this is a pan-European association, but my own local visual experience with this type of installation is closely tied to "folk art", often very poor in quality, which uses cut birch wood and the wood of other deciduous or coniferous trees and glues photographs to them or decorates them through burning; for this reason, I wish to separate the graphical qualities, which I consider important for the artist's development, and the resulting artefact. I'm not sure whether the author presents as the end result a collection of these objects in the form of graphics or whether what's included in the portfolio is only the documentation(?). Perhaps our cultural and contextual perception are simply incompatible here(?).

In the following year, Zhu created the already mentioned Food Safety Series; again, I highly appreciate its pressing theme and how it expands the audience's perception beyond what we are physiologically capable of. This interdisciplinary work draws equally from science, data gathered through research and from public sources, all artistically transformed into a message that has a greater impact on the viewer than a newspaper article. The artist uses the production and productive possibilities of electronic images to their maximum and marries a sociopolitical "hot topic" with art. Zhu Guanchu achieves this without being too didactic, descriptive or self-absorbed, which gives his work an even greater urgency and strength! I consider Mr Zhu Guanchu's dissertation thesis "Print Creation Research with Digital Technology-Transformation of Sign Language Symbols" to be very inspiring and, particularly in the practical part, innovative in many ways. His work is important because it links together cultural and sociopolitical contexts, promotes social and cultural dialogue and achieves a high artistic standard while expecting the audience to be perceptive and engaged. I happily recommend this thesis for acceptance.

Zbyněk Janáček   Ostrava, 9 December 2019