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“United in isolation. An online letterpress festival”. A community response to the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract | This contribution aims to investigate the experience of 'United in isolation. An online letterpress festival' which was held during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and its subsequent development.

In recent years, letterpress has experienced a renaissance: at an international level, several realities have recovered and reused machinery and tools of this ancient technique for quite different purposes. As this is a specific field that is only explored by a few people, the community has developed strongly and reached an international dimension.

Starting from the initiative of a few individuals, a weekly festival has been organised, in which in each episode four or five printers from different parts of the world streamed live from their workshops, showing spaces and tools that are difficult to share publicly in any other way. The ten episodes were well received by the public, representing a concrete response in terms of human relations and the advancement of specific knowledge on the subject.

The online archive that was created represents an important starting point for the study of the contemporary letterpress, as well as the repository of an irreplaceable network for issues such as the history of typography and printing.

KEYWORDS |

COMMUNITY, COVID-19, LETTERPRESS PRINTING, MOVABLE TYPES, ONLINE FESTIVAL.

1. The concept of community in letterpress

In the last decades of the 20th century, relief printing was gradually replaced in commercial printing by other, better performing technologies. In particular, movable type printing, which had remained largely unchanged for around five hundred years, became less and less widespread; during this phase, the tools of the so-called art of typography were discarded, and a wealth of widespread technical knowledge became, within a generation, the preserve of a few.

In recent years, there has been a gradual rediscovery of letterpress printing on an international level, which has led various realities to recover printing presses, movable type and everything necessary for the use of this technique (Passerini, 2014). In fact, only a part of these realities has continued to use letterpress in continuity with the profession's past; more commonly, the reasons for this revival lie in historical and cultural issues. In particular, they reside in the relationship with the field of new craft (Bonini Lessing et al, 2019), with the history of typography (Heller, 2019), with the didactic dimension (Marzotto Caotorta, 2007) and with the search for new forms of expression (Barmettler, 2017).

The adherence of many geographically dispersed entities to the letterpress revival has led to the creation of groups of people united by common interests and practices. By its very nature, a phenomenon of collective re-appropriation of craft skills and tools that have declined due to technological obsolescence entails, on the one hand, the search for sources and masters, and on the other, a marked tendency towards self-education: hence, in relation to one's own community, the sharing of knowledge and the need for comparison. For these reasons, in the last two decades, virtual spaces have appeared to serve these purposes: platforms serving the community (two above all: Briar Press and Letterpress Commons), video tutorials dealing with technical issues of printing and machine maintenance (e.g. the Youtube channel of Boxcar Press), Dafi Kühne's site dedicated to sharing information on FAG proof presses produced from the 1940s to the 1990s. In addition to the creation of dedicated spaces, printers have always used more immediate tools such as social media (originally Flickr and later Facebook and Instagram).

In particular, beyond the other best practices, it is worth highlighting the case of 'Drukwerk in de Marge', one of the most successful projects serving the letterpress community. The printers (*drukkers*) in the geographical area of the Netherlands and Belgium represent a clear case of a community that builds its own spaces for dialogue and sharing: they have developed a support network for printers and for the enhancement of the typographic heritage – also musealised – with both research and dissemination purposes.

In addition to a bimonthly physical magazine, Drukwerk in de Marge is a website where members are able to buy and sell printing material, share events and their own printed production, consult a map of participating realities, a forum and an archive section of historical and photographic material (samples, instruction manuals, spare parts for machinery). The functions seem to respond to the needs well expressed by a community

that is able to recognise and organise itself, and, more broadly, to problems that are common to all those who print with this technique, regardless of the geographical factor.

It is clear that the internationality and cross-country character that the letterpress communities themselves possess is due to the fact that, with a few exceptions, they do not share the same urban area. The letterpress community therefore appears to be a group of individuals from a heterogeneous origin who organise themselves above all virtually: this is made possible by the universality of the technique and tools, which makes it possible to overlook national and continental borders, as well as by the strong shared attitude to the protection of the material and immaterial typographic heritage that *typophiles* have in common.

Events such as *wayzgoose* (cycles of conferences, workshops and activities aimed at printers, of which there is a strong tradition in English-speaking countries) and international summits like Letterpress Workers have also contributed to the creation of a strong transnational letterpress community. The latter is an annual meeting held in Milan (Italy) since 2012 where, during a short artist residency, invited printers work together to share knowledge and cultural and design approaches.

The recent experience of 'United in Isolation. An online letterpress festival' fits into this particular and lively context.

2. The festival

"United in Isolation" was born in March 2020 with a simple Facebook post in one of the many groups dedicated to sharing experiences of the international community. A Norwegian printer wondered whether, given the emerging international situation, organising a series of live streams on the general topic of letterpress printing might be of interest. One of the first comments came from two Italian printers who, being already in quarantine – Italy was one of the first countries to be affected by security measures – gave their availability to hold a short talk from their home temporarily used also as a printing workshop and to help with the organisation. Since then, and for about a month, the three printers have worked together assiduously to set up the festival, arrange the technical issues and communicate the event.



Andreas Brekke
26 March

Hi. I have an idea. While we are all isolated, let's unite in isolation.

I'm just a norwegian letterpress fan, but I have made contact with many truly fascinating letterpress people throughout the world. I am planning a facebook event, a sort of an international letterpress festival in which selected letterpress people are invited to perform live in 30 minute streaming sessions. They will show their work, their collections, their studios and reflect upon the state of letterpress today.

Would you find this interesting?

Lets use the momentum of world gone crazy to come closer, to share the joy of letterpress.

#unitedinisololation

  121 38 comments 2 shares

 Like  Share

Figure 1. The post that marked the beginning of the festival, March 2020.

The festival format included four or five live streaming interventions via the official Facebook event page. In addition, an Instagram account has been created to advertise the event weekly.

In choosing the guests for each episode, it was decided to give priority to a geographical criterion, with guests representing as many different cultural realities as possible. Gender and racial issues were also strongly considered, although the latter was greatly facilitated by the geographical choices.

Furthermore, the presence in the same episode of very small realities and important institutions – in particular, Tipoteca Italiana Fondazione (De Michelis, 2019) and Hamilton Wood Type – managed to give a sense of the heterogeneity of the letterpress community, making evident both the differences in the means and approaches that the strong common attention to safeguarding the material and immaterial typographic heritage.

Each reality was given the opportunity, in the twenty minutes available, to freely choose the theme of the speech: if most of the participants chose to show their work tools or their production, there was no lack of more specific interventions and deepening on a single theme. In addition, many of the printers talked about their experience with the pandemic, directly informing the international public of the situation in their country of origin and talking about experiences of printing for charity to the reference emergency structures.

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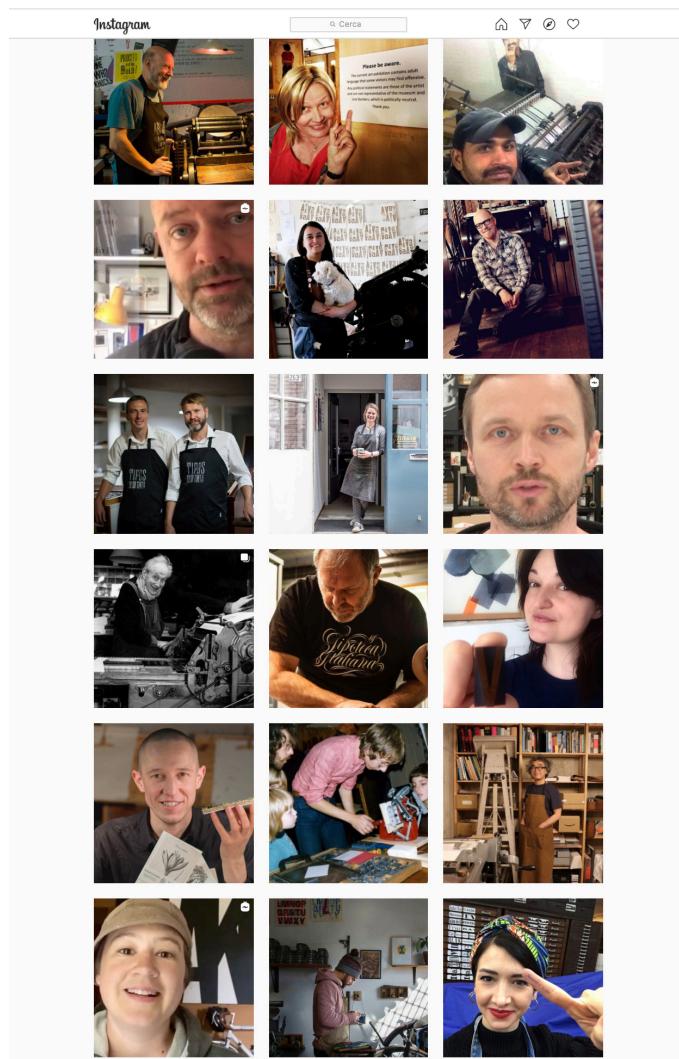


Figure 2. Instagram feed, photos of the printers who got involved are displayed with a promotional aim.

The first instalment was held on 18 April 2020. In addition to an introduction by the two Italian organisers, three printers from Australia, Russia and the USA were also guests: the latter two were later involved in the organising team, which was joined in the middle of the festival by two printers from England and Chile.

One of the festival's greatest achievements was to be able to connect printers from twenty-three different countries, guaranteeing representation from all five continents. Comparing such different experiences directly (one above all, a printer from Japan) has certainly made it possible to understand the differences and commonalities of letterpress printing.

Although a sense of belonging to the various letterpress communities was already strongly felt, this experience during the lockdown helped to generate the idea of a world community, in continuous dialogue and ferment.



Figure 3. A Japanese speaker showing his workspace in Tokyo.

3. Follow-ups

The audience, consisting of printers, graphic designers, students and researchers in the field of design, was extremely supportive of the idea of further development of the festival, leading to the organisation of a second season.

This new season saw some important improvements compared to the previous one. First of all, it has been decided to conduct thematic episodes, which would give the festival an additional degree of scientific relevance. The first episode, broadcast in November 2020, was focused on the contemporary production of movable type, and featured Dafi Kühne, Mark McKellier and Ryan Molloy. In particular, the use of numerical control technologies applied to various materials and the casting of new characters with plastic materials were investigated. Other episodes will be dedicated to topics such as different approaches in the

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printing process and the archiving of historical materials. It was also decided to increase the number of minutes available for each speech to thirty, in order to allow a more in-depth presentation.

Finally, the live streaming on Facebook was joined by that on Youtube, extending the possibility of viewing even to those who do not have a social network account. This was possible thanks to the use of StreamYard, a platform for managing live streaming that also allowed a better direction of the live broadcast and therefore a better experience for both the audience and the speakers. Thanks to this platform, a live question and answer section was included, previously impracticable due to the nature of the Facebook live broadcast.

New hypotheses for the preservation of the audiovisual material produced in both the first and second seasons are also being investigated, in order to be able to consult the content more easily through the use of metadata and specific search filters (Dalla Mura, 2016) and to represent a more accessible primary source for both the scientific and the letterpress community.

Tutti i video

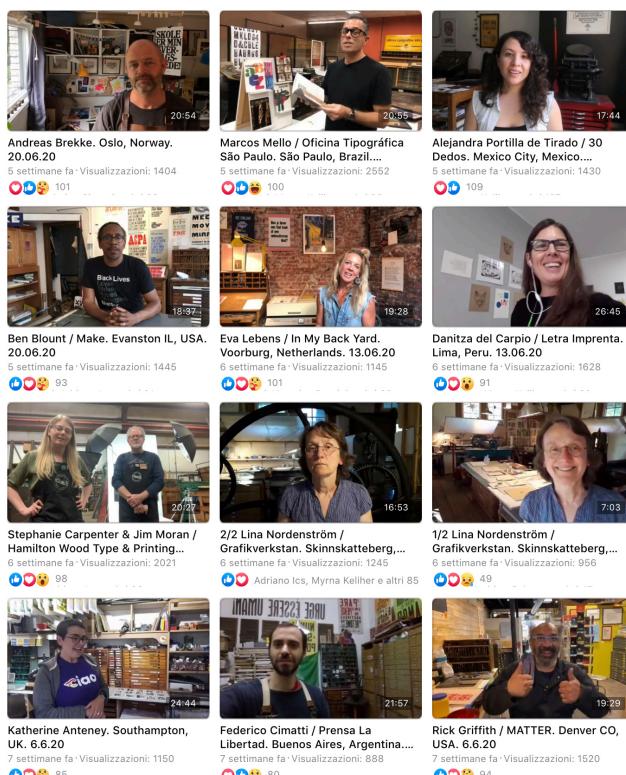


Figure 4. Festival video archive on Facebook.

While the need to find a more durable form of archiving than the feed of a Facebook page becomes evident, the hypothesis is also formulated that the festival could represent the first nucleus of a global archive of contemporary letterpress practices, constituting a form of digital enhancement of an analogue technology.

The festival also gave rise to the idea of a virtual group exhibition of prints related to the theme of the coronavirus, entitled "Letterpress printers responds to a pandemic", in which printers from all over the world, from New Zealand to South America, took part. The variety of the works presented and the processes used tell a lot about the heterogeneous nature of the community, which moves across the fields of art, craft and design.

Finally, the success of the 'United in Isolation' initiative has been documented in various articles and magazines, such as the Lockdown diaries issue in Printmaking Today (UK) and in the online publications of Typograp.her (New Zealand) and Letterpress Workers.

4. Conclusions

The experience of 'United in Isolation. An online letterpress festival' represents a concrete response of a community that found itself, because of Covid-19, only able to continue its activities to a small extent, some of the solutions adopted in other contexts, such as smart-working, being ineffective or simply impossible.

It is important to note the contrast between the peculiar concreteness of letterpress and the intangible dimension of the printers' response to the pandemic; a response that managed to exploit the adverse conditions not only to cancel spatial and temporal distances, but to create something completely unprecedented. It is clear that in no case could the sharing of workspaces – and the consequent assortment of presses, typefaces and tools – have found a better way. In fact, the festival formula shifted the focus from the final artefact to the design process, a fundamental element for fully understanding the specificities of this particular way of designing.

From a scientific point of view, the selection of participants in the festival (that in most cases occurred through self-candidacy) has no claim to completeness; but in fact, it constitutes a first nucleus from which to attempt to draw some minimal conclusions about the letterpress phenomenon in relation to the geographical areas to which they belong.

From all the speeches, it is evident that some issues are transversal to all printers and that nationality is not a decisive variable, while for others the country of origin has a decisive influence on some issues.

For example, the context in which one has chosen to set up the print shop actively affects both the themes of the artefacts and the environment of the workshop – for example, the possibility of setting up the print shop in the backyard or basement of one's home, which is

effectively impossible for anyone living in a metropolitan environment but quite common for those who, regardless of their country of origin, live in a rural environment.

The most important aspects linked to the geographical area concern some technical issues and others related to the equipment available.

In fact, each country has its own peculiarities, such as the type height (height of the physical characters), which must be taken into account especially when using equipment from other countries. In addition, each country had its own reference manufacturers, and therefore its own design, which contributed to the creation of that country's image. However, from this point of view, during the various live broadcasts it was possible to find several very interesting links from a historical point of view: for example, some companies, such as the Italian Nebiolo foundry, had a flourishing market in South America, and this is testified by the equipment of some of these printers; on the other hand, it is well known that often in some countries the design of foreign characters was copied almost integrally and brought back as new in their own reference market, a detail that did not escape the notice of some spectators at the festival.

Furthermore, some cases, such as those of the Japanese and Pakistani printers, were really interesting because they actually represent a unicum regarding certain economic and cultural issues.

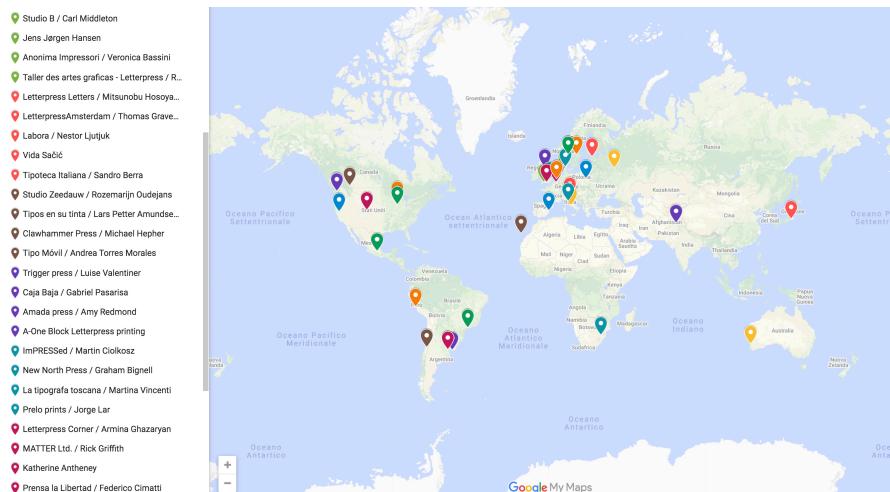


Figure 5. A map that traces every printer and location of the first season; colors define the different episodes.

In synthesis, the archive of live streams, although with technical limitations and a spontaneous attitude, represents an unequalled repository on the phenomenon of

contemporary letterpress, which will hopefully constitute an authoritative primary source for any research on the subject.

Finally, the festival was an excellent way of responding on a human level to the pandemic, allowing relationships to be forged on an international level, regardless of geographical boundaries or prejudices. Against the backdrop of daily hatreds on social media, this network of people demonstrated their ability to not only appreciate but actually value diversity, ensuring an inclusive and shared experience.

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