



PAUL SOULELLIS's studio, Counterpractice, is currently located in New Inc., the art, design and technology incubator led by the New Museum in New York. You might describe its white walls and row upon row of gleaming aluminium desktops as an ideal backdrop for cross-disciplinary innovation, which is the essence of Soulellis's protean practice...

Text by **ARIELA GITTLEN**.

**SCENES FROM A
DESIGNER'S
COUNTERPRACTICE**

BUT

the setting didn't feel right when the photographer arrived to take Soulellis's portrait. 'When I showed him around he said, "I don't think so,'" Soulellis recounts, laughing. 'He felt that this would be a great space to tell a story about the New Museum, but it didn't feel personal to me.' Forsaking the slick environs of New Inc., photographer and subject walked to the nearby workshop of an elderly bookbinder, who hand-binds a special edition of Soulellis's *Printed Web* project. They shot the portrait in basement room amidst piles of paper, fabric and old books.

Tensions between new and old, screen and print, separation and intimacy are often present in Soulellis's practice, which began with a successful career in design and branding. Now he divides his time between teaching, commercial work and more experimental pursuits, such as curating and publishing web-based art in his *Library of the Printed Web* series. His site-specific publishing projects, including *Portlander*, *Weymouths* and *5:30*, each focus on the life of a small community, requiring Soulellis to act as observer, collector and temporary resident as well as designer and artist. These projects are more concerned with the circulation and distribution of the publication than with its physical form. Although the resulting printed matter is lovingly designed and produced, the central focus of the work is social connections.

We met at New Inc., in a six-story building, nestled up against the New Museum's south wall. Soulellis is voluble but soft-spoken, his enthusiasm tempered by a designer's

impulse towards precision. He laughs often and is quick to give credit, cite history and champion his influences. We talked about Duchamp, the Fluxus movement and Hito Steyerl, but I couldn't have guessed it was a small island in the Aegean Sea that had had the most profound effect on Soulellis's work.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up on Long Island. My father's from Greece and my mom is American. We did a lot of travel back and forth to Greece to visit my grandparents there. That split, or dual, cultural childhood, influenced how I look at the world. The site-specific publishing that I do, like the *5:30* project, *Portlander* and *Weymouths*, all took place on islands or small towns on the sea. This comes from my childhood spent visiting this tiny little town on the isle of Lesbos and feeling, frankly, confused about who I was there.

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I was not trained as a graphic designer, I was trained as an architect, but I had my own graphic design practice for many years and it was a very successful business. Five years ago, I went through a big break and suddenly decided to try and answer the question: What kind of designer am I? I hadn't gotten to artist yet. That wasn't even part of my vocabulary. I let go of a dozen clients, closed my office, got rid of everything and everyone, including my therapist, and took off—to the American Academy in Rome.

In Rome, I ended up making a little artist's book of impressions and ideas about the city. I just made one copy and had a little open studio before I left Rome. That was really the first time I did something like that, a project for myself. When I came back to the US that's when the real questions started.

What was your first major artistic project?

Weymouths, which I did for the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. I got a commission to do a 12-volume set of books about Weymouth, England, and Weymouth, Massachusetts, and the connections between them. I did an edition of 20 of each of the books and gave them away in the town of Weymouth [England] during the Olympics. That was a real turning point because I had never thought that artist's books could be performative. The books ended up being an excuse for me to have conversations with people, because I had them lying out on the street, and as people came up to me to ask what was going on, I would tell them about the project and give them a book. That was my first clue that a book



doesn't need to be static, that the circulation of the book and my participation in that could be maybe at the core of the project.

Could this project act as an antidote to the superficial interactions we have within an online network, which is ostensibly all about community, but doesn't have the same impact as an encounter on the street?

I'm so into community in social media and digital networks, but enacting hand-to-hand, face-to-face interactions felt like a way to explore another kind of network. During that project, I had all 12 books set up in the local bakery. I met half the town. An elderly woman stayed all afternoon and went through every single book. At the end she said: 'Thank you for creating this social network.' I thought, 'Wow, social network, exactly. That's what this is.'

Does your approach to self-initiated projects differ from that of your work for clients?

I approach my projects as design projects, but with the freedom to ask myself, 'What larger issues do I want to explore?' Frequently with client work the larger issues tend to be things like branding, profit or how we consume. Those are interesting questions, but I want to ask other questions.

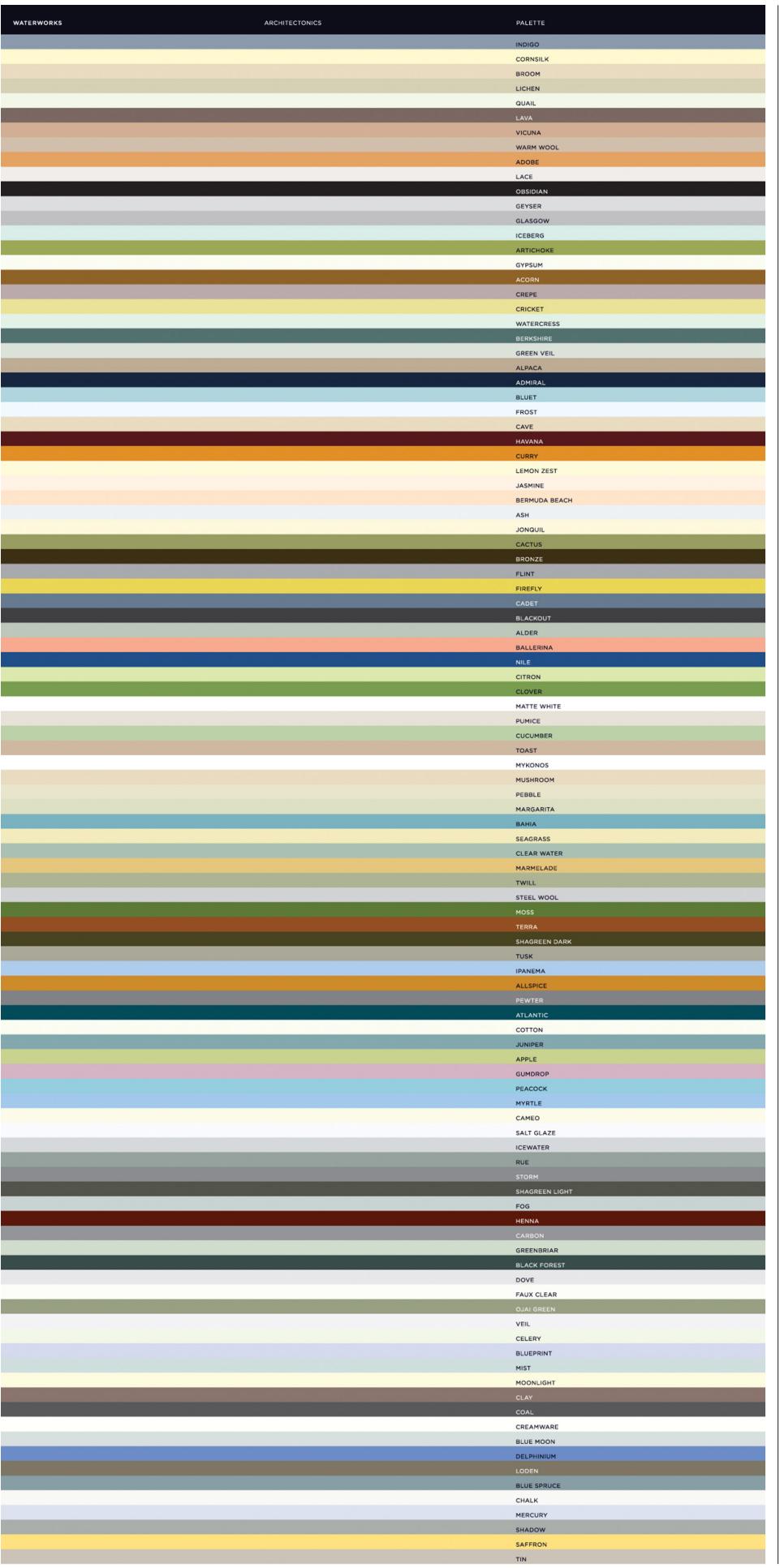
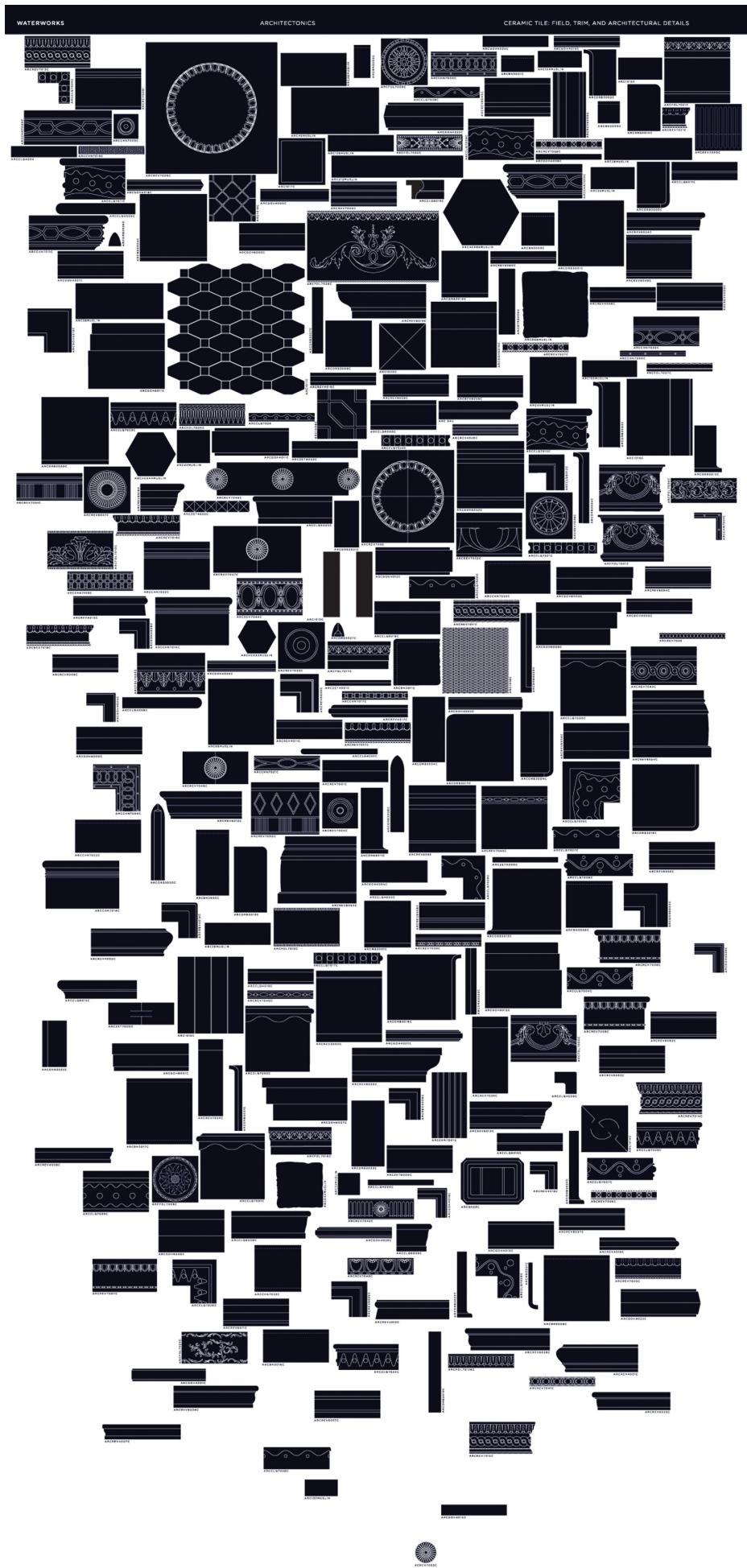
In a sense, Portlander and Weymouths are branding projects for those communities.

No one has ever made that point, but in a way they do end up encapsulating or embodying some aspect of a place.

Designers and 'design thinking' have been much praised lately. What are your thoughts on the state of the designer today?

I see a lot of us, myself included, struggling with 'I made a font' or 'Here's an illustration—now how do I get this onto a network and have people buy it?' You have the designer, the community and commercial activity. How do you bring these things together in a way that isn't crass, that doesn't exploit yourself or the profession? We need to do it carefully because this is new territory for the designer. I'm very inspired by people like Tina Roth Eisenberg [known online as Swiss Miss] who are taking, quote, 'side projects' and creating very successful businesses out of them. Tina engages with designers and creates discourse through the design community and I think that's really really powerful. I hate the term 'side projects'. I hate thinking about them being on the side, because they can be the most important things you're doing.

I was influenced by Metahaven's essay 'Research and Destroy', which tracks the shift, over the last 50 to 60 years, toward an independent discourse-making designer and critical thinker. I like to think that that's what Counterpractice is. I have four parts to my practice: research, my own publishing projects, client work and teaching. They don't always all



connect, but if I can get at least two of them to connect then I'm really happy.

Do they sustain each other?

Right now they do. I hope they continue to. I try not to have things be too balanced or too comfortable, but instead to challenge the routine that can come about in a practice.

My favourite lesson from design school was 'get comfortable with being uncomfortable'.

Designers are paid to do that for clients. It comes easy to us when we're doing it for someone else. It's a lot harder to do it for yourself.

The Printed Web features the work of artists who use the internet as their medium. How did that project come about?

I was asked to show work at the 'Theorizing the Web' conference and decided to include projects by other artists who were also working with Google or network-based archives. I started asking around and next thing I knew, I had about 50 projects. I had a wooden case built for them. On wheels. I don't know why. It felt right to materialize the collection and exaggerate its physicality.

I rolled the case up 5th Avenue to the conference and put it onto the table. People were fascinated. Everyone thought that I was a bookstore and wanted to buy these books. I said, 'No, this isn't a commercial project. I'm showing this as a curated collection.' That's when I realized the *Library of the Printed Web* should live beyond this two-day event. Next thing I knew, I was forming a community of artists through this collection. I thought, wouldn't it be great if I could present new work from these artists in some way, instead of just collecting?

Seth Siegelaub had just passed away. He was a gallerist and curator of the late 60s, famous for his xerox book where he gave 24 pages to seven conceptual artists and said, 'Do whatever you want, but it will be xeroxed and we're going to make an edition of 1,000.' I decided to do *Printed Web #1* in a similar way. I gave the artists six pages each. The only criterion was that the material had to come from the web. I was putting something into motion as a curator, publisher and artist as well as a designer. This leads me into a territory that I'm trying to define in the teaching that I do at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] in experimental publishing: the empowerment of the artist today to publish and the performative nature of that. It's not entirely new, but it's more powerful than it's ever been.

What forms has the Printed Web taken since its creation?

Printed Web #1 was a newsprint zine, 1,000 copies. The second issue was a magazine, purely print on demand. For *Printed Web #3*, I wanted to create a publication in several formats, not privileging any one of them. If a work can be published in several formats, it can also occupy

Portrait of Paul Soulellis by Paolo di Lucente, taken at Henry Bookbinding, Henry Street, New York City

Previous spread
Two-sided poster for Waterworks 2008

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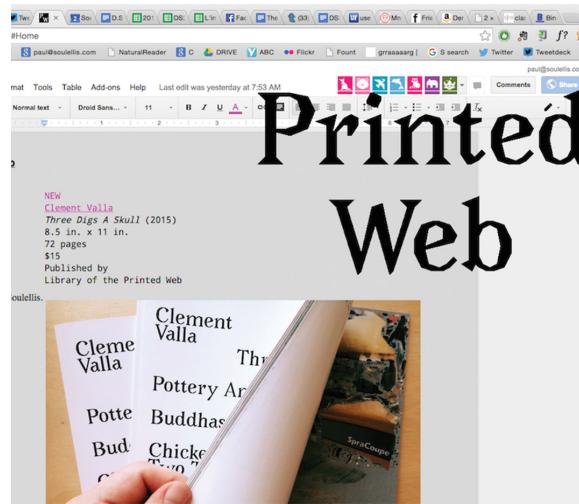
Printed Web website (printedweb.org)

Printed Web 3 Chinatown Edition 2016

Printed Web 1 2014

Library of the Printed Web 2013-ongoing

Printed Web 3 Reader/Index 2015



various social and economic positions that address different kinds of communities.

For instance, because *PrintedWeb #3* was an open call, it was very important that everybody be able to access some version of the publication for free. We launched the whole thing with Rhizome [an affiliate of the New Museum] as an Apache server directory, so you can download every file for free. Another version is a paperback reader that contains all the files as well as an essay and an interview. I also did a special limited edition of 10 for collectors. This version is printed on demand and taken to Henry's Bookbinding where Henry rebinds them by hand. Finally, it's wrapped in a fabric PDF. I took 10 of my favourite files and printed them on neoprene, playing with this idea of the PDF as something fluid, not quite static, but still material. It feels like it came right out of the network—and it did.

The description/manifesto for your RISD class refers to the 'bruised image'. What is it and how does it relate to your concerns?

That term comes from Hito Steyerl. In her essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', she writes about the image circulating on networks that are not neutral. Things don't travel without effect. Images and texts become politicized, their meaning shifts. Many of the artists who are involved with the *PrintedWeb* are concerned with what happens when the image changes states: from a web page to a printed page, from a browser to the desktop, or from one social media network to another.

This is where the material lives now, in these in-between states.

What these artists are doing seems to refer to something that happens often online, when an image gets replicated so often on Pinterest or Tumblr that it's impossible to trace back to its original context.

I'm fascinated by that, I really am. Seth Price talks about the horizontal blur that occurs in that process of being infinitely replicated and the absence of the original. A kind of speeding up or an acceleration of the image. Price talks about dispersing an image in order to slow it down, and that is part of what I'm interested in in the *PrintedWeb* project, a kind of slowing down in order to focus on that image, in order to pay attention in a different way. When I first started the project I was really concerned with the obvious qualities of materiality, tactility. Now I'm more interested in the ephemerality of going back and forth and not really fixing it in one state or another.

What is the role of memory in your work?

Memory is a biggie with the *PrintedWeb*. We're in the business, culturally, of outsourcing our memory to devices. Everything now is being given over to software and hardware of various forms that contain our memories. I love this idea and I'm horrified by this idea, but I love it more than I am scared of it. Without Instagram, I wouldn't know what I'm doing with my life. I don't know if that's sad or it's just the reality of what's available to us.

Why name your design studio Counterpractice?
In 2013, I gave a talk at the Build Conference in Belfast called 'Resistance: Scenes from a Designer's Counterpractice'. I recounted how I made the break from branding and started exploring this other way of doing work. I ended by saying, 'Here are these questions, and I don't have any answers. This is where I am as a designer right now, sceptical and concerned about my reliance on branding as a way of defining my practice.' I was really confused about what to do next. I suddenly found myself without an office, without a studio, kind of floating. When I heard about New Inc., I realized I needed to align myself with a community so that I didn't feel so alone in this search.

During my interview to join New Inc., Karen Wong, the deputy director of the New Museum, asked, 'Why do you want to be here? Are you having a midlife crisis?' We laughed for about a minute and I said, 'I'm actually coming in here to avoid having a midlife crisis. I want to redefine what this practice is.'

The only thing I didn't have was a name. I was really struggling until my friend Wendy told me: 'Go back to that talk that you made in Ireland. The answer is in that talk.' I went back through it and said, 'Counterpractice, of course.'

I think midlife crises get a bad rap.
I don't look at it in any kind of negative way. It's growth. All the cheesy cliché words are true. If things are going well you're constantly reevaluating: 'Where am I in my practice?' I'm still doing

THAT.