

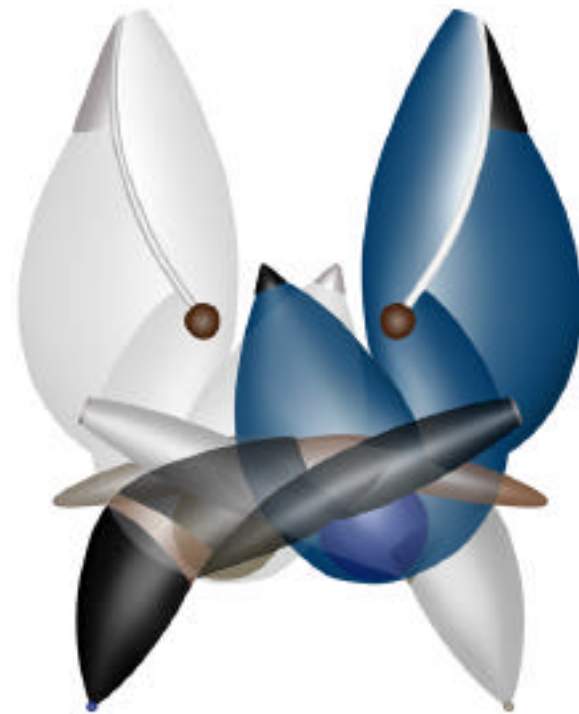
The Digital Meets the Handmade

How and why does the duo ChanSchatz enlist non-artists to collaborate on digital prints?

By Tobey Crockett

New York-based artists Eric Chan and Heather Schatz collaborate not only with each other (as ChanSchatz), but with selected participants, to create limited editions challenging the preconception that there is no such thing as an "original," collectible work of digital art. The duo's prints, which seem to portray mutant insects or alien flowers, and their installation-like displays have a specific aesthetic that's appropriately tech-inspired. Glossy, slick, brightly hued forms reference not only voluptuous iMac-style industrial design, but also the "finish fetish" movement of the 1960s, in which L.A. painters created a futuristic brand of minimalism inspired by the sleek translucency of plastic. Presented within acrylic bubbles and on top of chromed tablet-like backboards that take the place of a traditional gallery frame, a ChanSchatz print also recalls the consumer product design features of Andrea Zittel's A-Z: An Institute of Investigative Living" constructions and Jorge Pardo's reinvention of architectural experiences.

ChanSchatz avoids choosing between extremes, such as low versus high, handmade versus machine-made, or even analog versus digital. As Heather Schatz says, "The thing that I feel most strongly about is how the binary, the 'either/or,' can instead be explained as a simultaneity of both positions." ChanSchatz's interest in a range of gradations is evident in the way they have



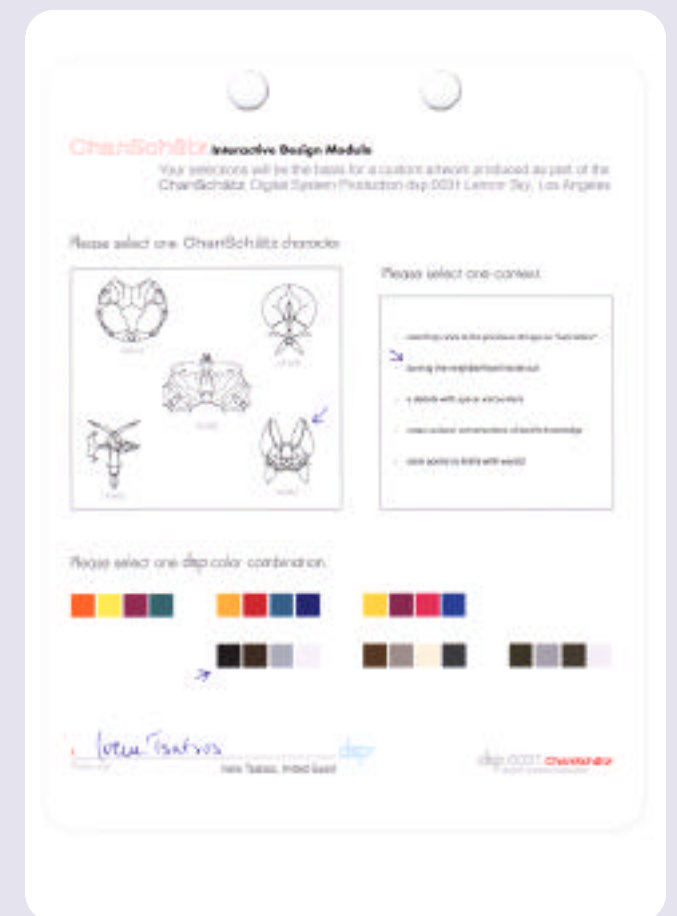
involved outside, non-artist collaborators, namely curators, collectors, and critics – those who have the strongest, most divergent opinions about any given work of art – in the production of their artwork.

The duo internalizes a "digital" notion in their work, but differ from other printmakers who simply reference computer media (such as Peter Halley in his "Cell" screenprints), or the legions of emerging new-media artists for whom the medium has become the proverbial message. By utilizing the concepts of "interactivity" and the "network" in flesh-and-blood terms, ChanSchatz make these ideas tangible as the world sobers up post-tech-boom. The team invites participants to indicate their compositional choices for color, shape, and context on a paper form, the "Interactive Design Module" (IDM). In the tradition of Fluxus, the choices are intentionally absurd, ranging from "turning the neighborhood inside out" to "cross-cultural conversations of bodily knowledge." Participants sign and mail the IDM, via the U.S. Postal Service, to ChanSchatz. This juxtaposition of techie-style vocabulary and simple, analog actions reminds us that digital modes of communication are simply part of the evolution of human interaction. As Peter Lunenfeld, author of *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (MIT Press, 2000), remarks, "I'm interested in contemporary fluidity, and ChanSchatz's model of just-in-time

cultural production brings its own pleasures to bear in the realms of computer-inflected media."

Upon receipt of the IDM, ChanSchatz transforms the data into an informational portrait or "datagraph," authorized by the participant's signature and processed into a print by ChanSchatz via design software. But is it art? Eric Chan acknowledges the provocative potential of a product-based practice, stating "We are interested in a blend of discourse and productivity. Our work is driven by an interest in editions which could be accessible in a 'mass-customizable' context." The artists' edition system consists of multiple variations of presentations methods, so works come with customized hardware or limited-edition digital animations, resembling what one sees when turning a kaleidoscope, created from the images that participants choose.

ChanSchatz use an alphanumeric naming device to emphasize the systematic and quasi-industrialized aesthetic of their work, yet they also specify the human choices that distinguish each file. Codes are individuated with letters and numbers, drawn from the IDM series number and the initials of the participants, a taxonomy of sorts. This past summer, Lemon Sky: Projects + Editions in Los Angeles showcased the results of the duo's working process in an exhibition that featured new collaborative prints. In *Universals UN.0021 mh* (2002), made with independent Madeline Hoffman, a luscious visual shimmers and shimmies on the page, centered neatly in a brilliant white background. The straightforward composition is formally similar to the floating confections of the Pop artist Wayne Thiebaud, who inflects negative space with candy-colored visuals in his prints. This collaborative print by ChanSchatz and Hoffman, however, is as symmetrical as a Rorschach inkblot, rendered in carefully distributed color, its meticulous evenness nearly robotic. By contrast, the color in *Universals UN.0067 it* (2002), created with Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions director Irene Tsatsos, is more indiosyncratic. The butterfly-like shape of the composition is unevenly hued, although the shape seems perfectly symmetrical; the off-kilter nature of this image conveys the "uniqueness" of the print. This sense of the unique is what ChanSchatz seek to emphasize, an idea that many digital artists, curators, and collectors are struggling with. When looking at most computer-based art, such as Internet art, viewers are always confronting the lack of a tangible, static original. The software code is the artwork; at the same time, the interactivity shapes the artwork, which is never the same twice. "There is no singular object that collectors can buy; an 'original digital artwork' is considered an oxymoron," says Schatz. "We're playing with this idea." The IDM can be seen as an "original" element



Opposite page: ChanSchatz, *UN.0067 it*, archival ink on Hahnemühle rag paper (24 x 24 in.), ed. 3, 2002. All images courtesy Lemon Sky.

ChanSchatz, *Interactive Design Module IDM.0177 itsatsos*, archival ink on Hahnemühle rag paper mounted on Intefoam rigid PVC, (8 3/4 x 13 1/2 in.) ed. 2, 2002.

in a digital artwork, one that is possible to collect.

This month, ChanSchatz publishes the *Handbook of the Digital Edition*, limited to 750 signed paper copies. The Handbook illustrates their edition system with a diagram, which appears as an elaborate flow chart, depicting the exchange between ChanSchatz and their solicited collaborators. As the *Handbook* makes clear, ChanSchatz editions represent only the material output of a larger conceptual framework. The viewer, participants, and artists are communally engaged in a breeding program of visual combinations; it's as if ChanSchatz have set loose a virus that uses the participation of art world devotees to disseminate itself. Despite the precise detail and slickness of presentation that characterize their productions, it's clear that ChanSchatz do not ignore the bottom line of actual substance.

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