

Picasso's CMYK Period



R.C. Baker

2023 (plates printed 2018)

Four aluminum printing plates, emulsion, ink, solvent

Each 35 x 22.75"



Magenta plate.



Yellow plate.



Detail from magenta plate.

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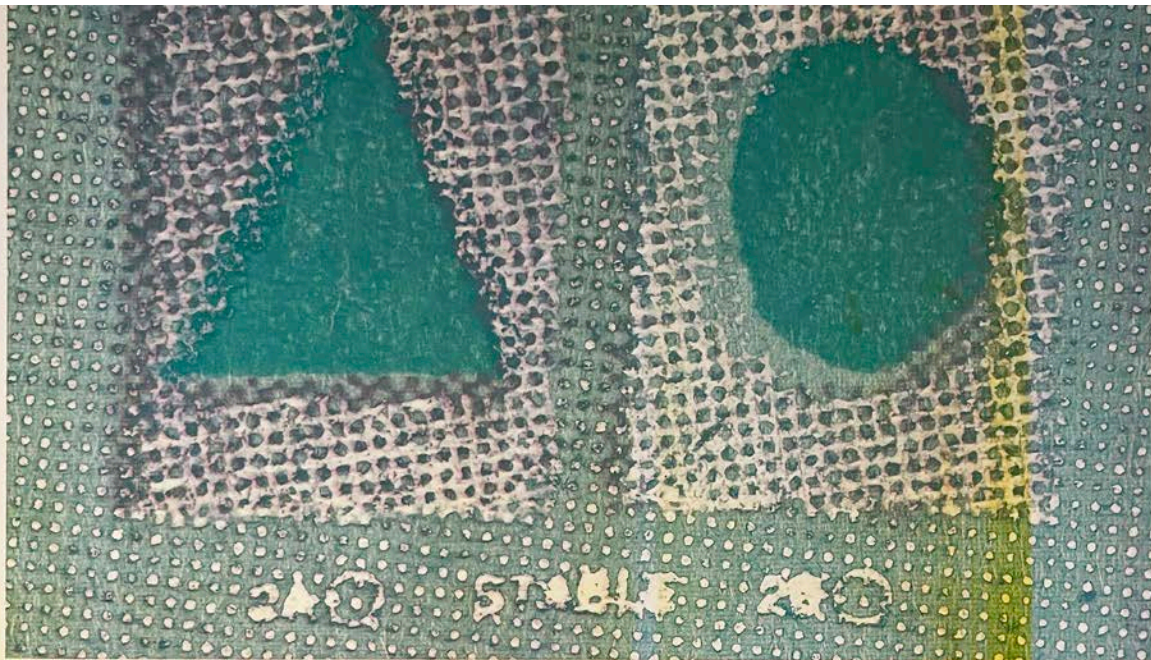
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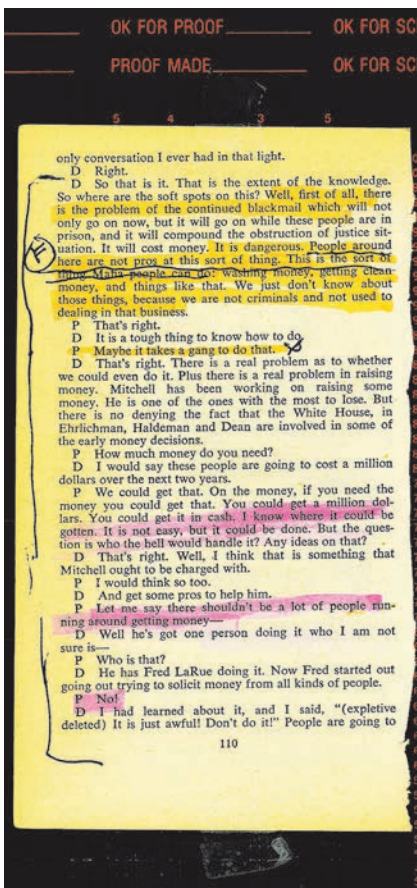
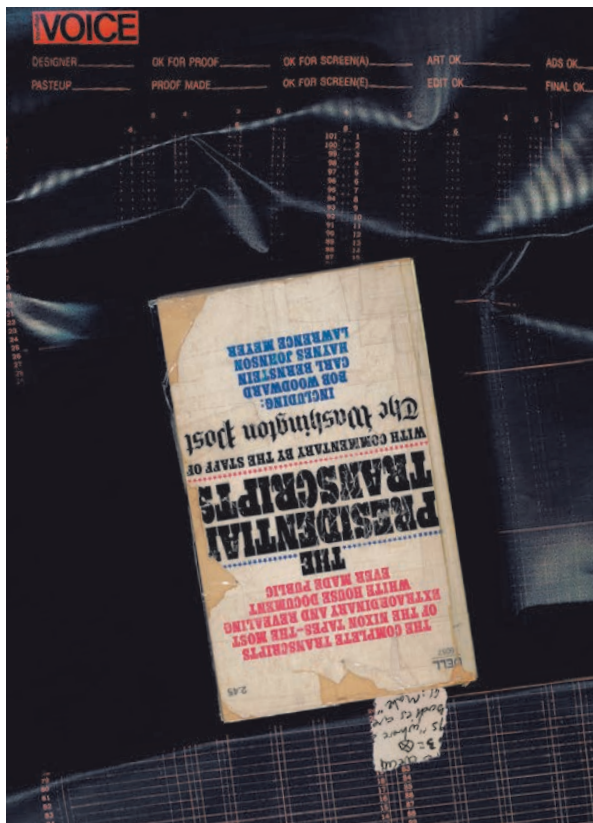
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Details from black and yellow plates.



of photographic reproductions in its final report, such as exhibit number 390: "Frame from motion picture taken by Abraham Zapruder of motorcade showing explosion from bullet as it hit President Kennedy's head." This was frame number 313, from a total of 486. Perhaps out of decorum (or—as more than half of the American public has consistently believed for more than half a century—to cover up a conspiracy involving the highest levels of the American government and/or Cuban leader Fidel Castro plus assorted Mafia bosses), the image is printed so small, in mottled black and white, that only assassination cognoscenti can discern the cloud of bone fragments and brain matter caused by a high-powered bullet striking Kennedy's skull.

Initially, the Zapruder frames took a typical journey for that era. First, the images on the six feet of celluloid were developed by Eastman Kodak's Dallas film-processing laboratory. Zapruder had used Kodak Kodachrome II "reversal" film, which meant the images could be viewed immediately by because, like slide film, they came out positive. Three "first generation" copies (meaning new strips of color film that were exposed from the original) were struck at that time, two for government investigators and one for Zapruder himself. The next day he sold the original to *Life* magazine, but—having had a nightmare about an advertisement in Times Square blaring, "See the President's head explode!"—he stipulated that the magazine not reproduce frame 313. *Life* printed a number of frames in black and white, though not the gruesome headshot that would become the Warren Commission exhibit.

The Zapruder frames illustrate how any photographic image, already nothing more than a two-dimensional approximation of 3-D reality, moves from an original—whatever information the lens focused onto the film emulsion—to copies of ever-decreasing fidelity. In the most basic terms, an original photo prepared for mass distribution in 1963 would have been shot with another camera using a type of negative film that would apply a halftone pattern of regularly spaced printer's dots. These are necessary because the smooth gradations of the original film grain would clog with ink on a printing press. This negative image would be reversed into a positive printing plate through a laborious process of acid etching and metal burnishing, then be locked onto a printing cylinder that would transfer the ink, backward, onto a rubber printing blanket, which would apply the final, correct-facing image to the paper.

Each "generation" of this process results in a slightly less faithful version of the original. Many other factors, including type of press, paper quality, mechanical adjustments, and craftsmanship also enter into the picture, until we end up with exhibit 390 of the Warren Report—national tragedy reduced to high-contrast abstraction.

Andy Warhol, more than any other artist at the time, appreciated that imperfections in the graphics process could mirror human foibles. Warhol's aesthetic was at its best when he nailed a mood of melancholy and longing—his gold Marilyn levitating somewhere between Catholic saint and Hollywood goddess; Jackie Kennedy with winning smile, then in mourning veil,

know about those things, because we are not criminals and not used to dealing in that business.

PRESIDENT: That's right.

DEAN: It is a tough thing to know how to do.

PRESIDENT: Maybe it takes a gang to do that.

DEAN: That's right. There is a real problem as to whether we could even do it. Mitchell has been working on raising some money. He is one of the ones with the most to lose. But there is no denying the fact that the White House—in Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and Dean—are involved in some of the early money decisions.

PRESIDENT: How much money do you need?

DEAN: I would say these people are going to cost a million dollars over the next two years.

PRESIDENT: We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done. But the question is who the hell would handle it?

Then there were exchanges that simply disappeared from the tapes. To this day, no one knows what was said between Nixon and his aide H.R. "Bob" Haldeeman on June

20, 1972, three days after the Watergate break-in. This is the tape that was obscured by a mysterious 18-and-a-half-minute erasure. If you listen to the "gap" in the two men's conversation, you'll hear a steady hiss, which periodically changes in pitch, followed by a series of loud clicks. (You can hear this historic buzz at the beginning and end of *President: Why?*) I also use it as white noise in my headphones when I'm writing on the subway.) Acoustic experts believe this sound pattern was caused by as many as five separate erasures, which suggests someone who was not technically savvy seeking to eliminate an incriminating statement.

Famously, along with even the most basic office equipment, Richard Nixon threw the blame on a loyal subordinate, his private secretary, Rose Mary Woods. The nation was informed that she'd accidentally left her foot on the recording pedal when he leaned at an awkward angle to talk on the phone. The press deemed it the "Rose Mary Stretch."

And when the transcripts were published, words that were deemed too harsh for the American psyche were excised. "Hell" and "damn" generally made it into print, but for other expressions, citizens had to use their imaginations.

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PRESIDENT: What in the (expletive deleted) caused this? (unintelligible.)

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What good are computers? They can only give you answers.
—Pablo Picasso

How long until a signal fades to incomprehensible noise? When does noise become an abstraction? Why are abstractions so beautiful?

One day, two, too many years ago, I watched a pressman squirt solvent across the fast-spinning steel cylinders of a printing press. He was Chinese and spoke little English. I spoke none of his language. But through my hand gestures he had understood that there was a blotch on a page of the *Voice Literary Supplement* that I wanted him to fix. I walked over to the conveyor belt where the finished copies were disgorged by the press, and for a brief but precious moment I saw lovely abstract blooms of pink and blue spread across the pages. I kept grabbing copies until the beautiful blobs faded and reconstituted themselves into a page of halftone photographs and columns of text, meaningful words I've long since forgotten.



Page marriages of pages 9-24 and 12-21 of tabloid publication *President: "Why?"* in press configuration.

DENT: I think maybe you're

N: The people that voted for
[laughter]

DENT: Yeah.

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such a discussion, at least pri-
t when the tapes were released
ipt form as the nation considered
ixon should be impeached, the
was confronted with dialogue
t have been considered too bump-
for a mediocre TV drama. On
1973, Nixon and the White
ansel, John Dean, discussed the
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ers in the Watergate office

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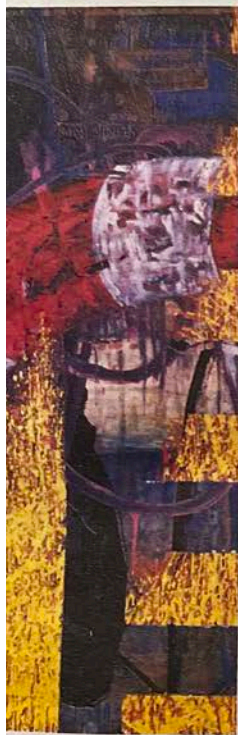
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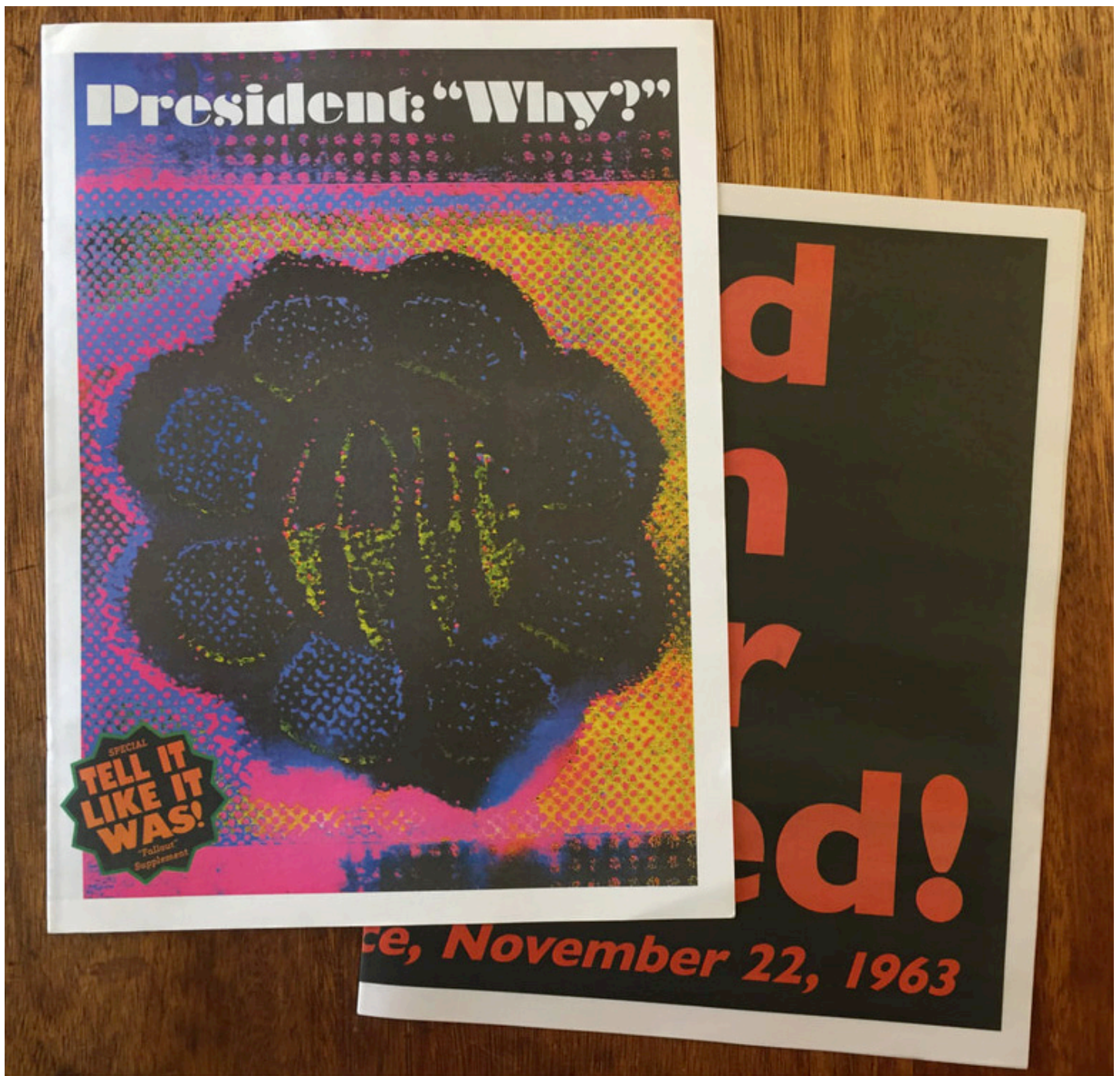
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Front page and poster quotes insert of *President: "Why?"* tabloid newspaper.

PICASSO'S CMYK PERIOD

"Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level." So wrote Walter Benjamin in his seminal 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Among many other insights, the cultural critic was noting that printing a halftone picture of a religious icon in a magazine can rob an artwork of its "aura"—of its unique purpose as an object of mystery and veneration that exists in a specific time and space.

So how much more thievery of spirit might it be to reduce art to mere words on paper?

In 1935, Pablo Picasso was already one of the most famous artists who had ever lived; that status hasn't changed since he died, in 1973. Sometime late in his life, he made the insightful and prescient comment (scholarly investigators quibble as to the exact wording), "What good are computers? They can only give you answers."

We might therefore wonder what the German philosopher or the Spanish painter would think of our toddler generation of Artificial Intelligences, which regurgitate myriad online images into pixel pastiches—a grand larceny of "aura" that computers facilitate every second of every day.

In 2018—that innocent age when AIs still seemed more sci-fi than Wi-Fi—I was writing, illustrating, and designing (on an iMac, of course) a 32-page tabloid newspaper partially concerned with how "high" art and popular culture have been mass-produced since 1960. I titled it *President: "Why?"*

Because of the spectrum of jobs I've held at the *Village Voice*, I have a great deal of experience with high-speed commercial newsprint presses, and so I was interested not only in the content of my exhibition publication but also in how it would be printed. That's why I made a request that the owner of the printing plant I was using for my tabloid found fairly ludicrous: "I want the printing plates when you're done."

"Why? They'll be covered with ink and solvent. A [expletive deleted] mess!"

"That's okay. I want them for my show." He shrugged and told the foreman not to recycle the thin aluminum plates as per usual, but instead to box them up and truck them over to "this guy here who says they're art."

And they are: primary-colored amalgams of abstract expressionist smears and splatters, pop-art Benday dots, and Fluxus happenstance leavened by my lifelong obsession with mixing visuals and text—how words *appear* and what they say. Hence my kaleidoscopic essay in *President: "Why?"* that connects the Watergate scandal and the Kennedy and King assassinations and Richard Nixon and Andy Warhol and Shirley Chisholm with rock lyrics and government documents and baroque paintings and comic-book advertisements and other fragments and figments from our ever-burgeoning Information Age. But as that biting observation from a practitioner of the immemorial art of painting makes clear, information is only a collection of data—of *answers*—and that leaves out at least half the story.

In *Picasso's CMYK Period*, there are four plates, four pages, and four colors—Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, and blackK (the "K" is for "key plate"). You can only see the painter's name and his statement on the black plate, the plate that contains the most information, because text is generally printed in black—other inks are added to the black to complete any publication's images and designs. And the owner of the press who printed my paper was correct: The plates remain covered with solvents and inks that are still drying. But the bits of newsprint that collage innovator Picasso glued to his canvases in the 1910s began to yellow, fade, and become brittle long before he died; artworks have evolving lives of their own. Mechanical reproduction now has a long art history—I'm just working from the front end of that process.

Perhaps this is the flip side of Benjamin's thesis, because sometimes "aura" beckons from the most unlikely source, even from "a \$#%&?! mess!" You just have to be watching out for it.

And of course, as Picasso could've told you, it also helps to ask the right questions, the most expansive of which has always been, "Why?"

—R.C. Baker
May 2023