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Barbara Wyeth, Copyright holder
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Address: 1260 Broadway #105, San Francisco, CA, email: bwyeth@earthlink.net

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I think my first time using a color xerox copier was in 1978, about the time a friend, Diane Best, and I opened an art postcard store in San Francisco's North Beach. Traditionally a bohemian, jazzy-arty, beatnik neighborhood, North Beach was now the epicenter of the Bay Area's punk rock scene. Postcard Palace was just up the street from the San Francisco Art Institute and Tower Records, the hippest music emporium in town. A few blocks away were the music clubs on Broadway and Upper Grant Avenue. As soon as we opened. artists, musicians, purveyors of all things alternative, including artist-made postcards, posters, tee-shirts, books, art and music zines ,were at our door. Alternately, these were the waning years of Jimmy Carter and

the rise of smug, ultra-conservatism hiding behind the smiling face of Ronald Reagan.

It was into this milieu Color Xerox made its appearance. A friend who was a collage artist called to tell me about a copier in one of the studios at the Art Institute, a copier that made full color prints. I was amazed at the detail and the brilliancy of the colors. And it was “instant” and relatively inexpensive, certainly compared to offset printing that took a lot more time, a lot more money and required printing in large quantities. I had participated in a few group postcard printing runs and was left with hundreds of cards stacked up in my closet. I sold a few but never seemed to recoup the cost of producing them. The process was out of my hands. Here, on this copier, it was the opposite, totally hands-on. If an idea did not quite pan-out, there was no commitment. Art could be created as you went along. Images could be manipulated on the platen, the sequence of color passes adjusted, changed to create radically different effects. Because of the spontaneous nature of copy art, images could be topical, of the moment, political, timely - responding to the scene as it was unfolding. And that color, that rich, brash, high-contrast shiny color! The process was totally suited for the in-your-face attitude of the times.

Copy shops were proliferating and Color Xerox was touted as a new business tool. In most of these shops, an operator took your originals and made prints out of view, behind the counter. Some shops, however, were amenable to letting the customer work unattended. Artist friends would let others know what shop or gallery was the best to work with. Word would spread as to what machines were in

the best condition, what shops had the best prices, who was open late and didn't care what you printed or how crazy your project was.

At our store, Color Xerox art began to appear on postcards, in artists' books and magazines. Some of our exhibits were entirely Color Xerox art. Our annual Mail-In Postcard Art Show prominently featured cards made on the Color Xerox copier. Electro Arts, a Color Xerox Gallery moved in with us and our new partner started creating wonderful lively designs on tee shirts and sweat shirts using heat transfers. We experimented with slides, transparencies, transfers, all things do-able on her wonderful machine.

I had met Barbara Cushman in 1977 at the North Beach Photo Art Fair. She was an artist, too, but at this time was primarily selling and promoting art at her shop, A Fine Hand in Pacific Heights. In 1979 she put on the Color Xerox Group Show exhibiting just about every artist in the Bay Area who was working in this medium. It was a diverse, provocative and exciting show. Next, she created and produced the first Color Xerox Calendar bringing together mostly Bay Area artists but also including artists from the East Coast and Europe. Barbara produced this annual for five years. These calendars remain the quintessential expression of that era. Most of us thought it was a genre that would become prominent in the art world. But computer technology was developing rapidly and just as rapidly, Color Xerox became outmoded. Artists moved on, to newer ways to express themselves.

In many ways, Color Xerox was a precursor to computer art being done now; the immediacy, the ability to work and change and see even more "instant" results. The shiny color and amazing detail is

now on our screens. But looking at those wonderful calendars, and the wildly irreverent, fantastic and fun art from that period, I can think of no better way that it could have been expressed than on the Color Xerox copier.

Barbara Wyeth

1 July 2015