

A Borderless State: Re – Aligning Print in the Digital Age

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The integration of digital imaging and printing techniques into fine art printmaking has brought with it new creative freedoms and indeed some constraints when considered in relation to previous parameters of traditional practice. In this paper I wish to examine the creative and conceptual possibilities that have emerged and indicate some of the freedoms in their realization (especially in relation to mainstream pre-digital print practice). In considering how these possibilities lie, specifically within the historical continuum of fine print creativity, I aim to identify precedents that gradually emerged during the 20th century in order to re-align some of the enduring assumptions in the art world relating to the creative and qualitative integrity of digitally conceived and rendered prints.

Firstly I wish to look at a particular emphasis in fine art print that gained prominence during the modernist era. This revolved around the physical struggle between medium and artist and could best be described by the idea of ‘truth to materials’. According to print historian Pat Gilmour this was “one of the most important concepts in establishing the autonomy of print during the 20th century. For it is in stressing the nature of their means that artists have broken away from the immemorial conception of prints as imitations of works in the unique media”.ⁱ The concept was possibly first articulated by the sculptor Branchusi, who believed that the artist should coax an image from within, rather than force an image onto the material.ⁱⁱ Similar ideas about the role of materials in relation to image making were also held by key modernist printmakers such as SW Hayter who believed that an image must grow out of an improvisatory collaboration between material and the artists impulsesⁱⁱⁱ.

Although photomechanically mediated methods of image making introduced in the 1960’s initially questioned the concept of authorship and originality integral to the truth to materials canon, it ultimately led to a broadening of the ideal. Where previously gestural marks were transcribed autographically, photomechanical means could also be used – thus allowing images or marks borrowed from other media to become part of the artist’s creative palate. Such appropriations subsequently became simulacra; removed from their original source by the unique syntax of the small selection of (often photomechanically crude) mediums available to the artist. This device worked particularly well for the pop artists becoming a

means of amplifying the qualities and defects of mass production referenced within the creative realm of the pop art movement.

While the emphasis on the process of transformation embodied in the idea of truth to materials provided a tangible notion of originality, it also served to alienate other creative strands of print which operated on an entirely different level. Rather than integrating a combination of accidental and intended gestures, shaped by the influence of a particular medium or mediums, artists from movements such as the Dada, and the later Fluxus group used modern print techniques solely known for their imitative rather than material qualities. These allowed ideas to be more directly articulated without interference from extraneous nuance or gestural mediation.



RB Kitaj
The Defects of it's
Qualities 1967
Photo Screenprint

A notable example of this approach can be found in Marcel Duchamp's 1935 Green Box publication. In this work he strategically chose a print medium – collotype, rarely used by artists of the time- to create a multiple, interactive visual manuscript to articulate the infinite range of conceptual possibilities generated by his Large Glass. By using the remarkable ability of the medium (even by today's standards) to faithfully transcribe the alchemical essence of the immediate thought processes (recorded on scraps of paper during the production of the glass) allowed the box to retain and transmit in multiple the open-ended immediacy of the work's initial conception. Although this piece unquestionably relied on print to articulate a unique concept, Duchamp did not feel the need to transform, or colour his original intentions through the overt influence of a print syntax.

Like Duchamp, artists from the later Fluxus movement also used techniques outside the traditional range of artist's printing processes to convey in this case many of their 'art vaudeville' statements.

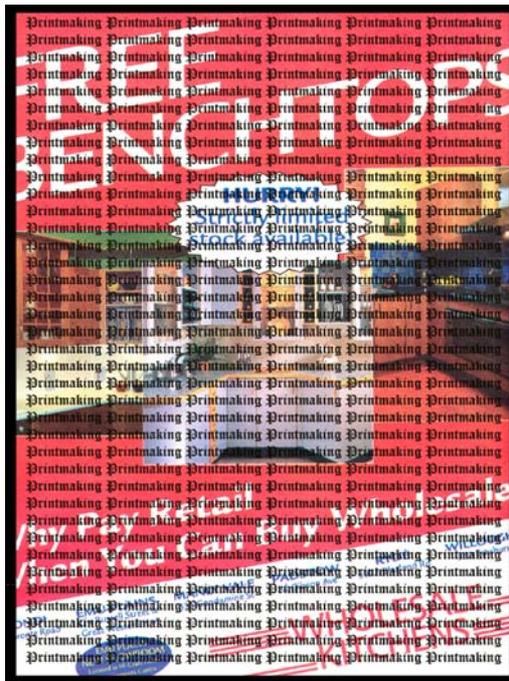


Marcel Duchamp
Green Box 1935
Collotype and Pochoir
prints in green felt boxes

Their particular modes of expression often employed graphic arts layout techniques reproduced through commercial offset lithography, screen print, photocopy and even rubber stamps. These were either, as with Duchamp, presented randomly in boxes or folded or constructed into objects or bound into books. Although Dada and Fluxus printed material has rarely been considered in the mode of fine art printed expression, each have contributed much to the field of print. While their engagement does not follow the accepted doctrine of traditional printmaking, their influence both technically and visually has filtered through to contemporary mainstream visual communication. In fact, if not for their work in fragmenting text and collaging images it could be argued that current computer graphics software may not have encompassed the degree of flexibility they pioneered.

Digital imaging has now replaced just about all the previous reprographic image capture, graphic layout and to a certain extent photomechanical printing techniques once widely used by industry. Through its assimilation into more widely available software, the pinnacle of what was on offer, and more, can be accessed by all –including artists.

This has fostered as observed by William Owen “...an enthusiasm but also a distrust of digital reproduction, within and beyond the world of art and connoisseurship”. Although Owens agrees it is not necessarily the case, he goes on to explain “digital reproduction appears to widen the divorce of the hand from the brain by eliminating human intervention in the process (and whereas the mechanical is modelled on the body, the digital is modelled on the brain alone)”^{iv}.



Michael Florrimell
Free Benchtops 2003
Ink jet Print

While digital means have been used to create -even as far back as the 1960’s- components of photomechanical prints, the more recent ability for a print to be entirely constructed and manipulated on screen by the artist before being committed to hardcopy is perhaps the current crux of the issue.

One of the major differences between producing a print by all digital and analogue means revolves around the nature and sequence of creation. Where an artist may have previously conceived an initial idea, it was often the case that this then evolved through a synthesis of influences marked by the artists physical engagement with materials and techniques. Rather than simply executing an idea as it was conceived, the process as suggested by Branchusi and Hayter was one of discovery with the final image forming as a direct result of the artists physical explorations. Digital is different in a number of ways. Firstly the journey from idea to realization is carried out virtually. As there is no physical evidence of this journey, it is often assumed that the image is modelled by the brain alone.

However –especially as digital becomes more and more haptic- there are many body based manouvers every bit as intricate and physical as the previous printmaking techniques which enable the body to have just as much influence as the mind in the creation of an image in its virtual state. Where digital breaks from the canon of truth to materials is that the physical action in creating these marks leaves only a virtual imprint.



Paul Thirkell
Fully Automatic 2005
Pigmented ink jet print

At this point the artist has to rely on the printing technology to render an accurate simulation of the physical qualities envisaged during the images virtual production. While it is often assumed that the virtual is transformed seamlessly to hardcopy with a single ‘command P’ a second journey of exploration comes into play for the digital artist at this stage. Contrary to popular assumption the transformation of a virtual file into hardcopy is a highly subjective exercise and requires a craft like knowledge and mastery of the process to achieve a desired result. Where once the printmakers concern was ‘truth to materials’ the digital printmakers concern in many cases could now be seen as a quest for ‘truth to simulation of virtual materials’.

Besides changing the sequence of creation one of the most significant the digital has had on print in recent years has been to vastly extend its borders. Although since pre digital times

there has been a blurring of the borders of photography and print, the ability of digital technology to pull together mediums from diverse backgrounds and combine their characteristics creatively using methodologies once common only to print has created something of a borderless state.



Andrew Atkinson
Necropolis 2004
C type print

No longer is print confined to traditionally sanctioned techniques, indeed no longer do you need to be a printmaker to make prints. The legacy of former models of print however, offers artists options for combining a wide range of imagery through adopting as a creative device the constraints of the truth to materials principle or the more expansive approaches indicated by Duchamp to create and explore concepts indicated by, but until now, never fully realized by the fine artist.

ⁱ Gilmour, Pat 1978 *The Mechanized Image*, p24 Arts Council of Great Britain

ⁱⁱ Varia, Radu, 1986 *Brancusi*, p 302, Rizzoci International Publishing

ⁱⁱⁱ Black, Peter 1992 *The Prints of Stanley William Hayter a complete Catalogue*, pp 36-37 Phaidon

^{iv} Lowe, Adam (editor) *Texts by Colin Franklin, William Owen and Brian Smith*, Digital Prints, p 19, Permaprint London 1997