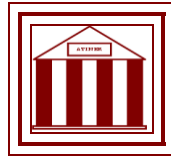


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
ART2015-1577**

**Future Print:
Re-envisioning Printmaking in a
Post-print World**

**Kathryn Maxwell
Professor
Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts
School of Art
Arizona State University
USA**

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ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
www.atiner.gr

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**Future Print:
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**Kathryn Maxwell
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Abstract

The digital revolution impacts individuals and their interaction with one another. Fundamentally these technologies can alter the matrix of society through changes in the way we work, play, communicate, and relate to our environment. Changes in digital technologies have certainly changed printmaking over the past 25 years; greater shifts due to the digital culture and in the broader field of art have also influenced the field of printmaking.

The dispersion and dissemination of images and ideas, traditional strengths of the multiple and printmaking, have increased exponentially due to the digital revolution. The Internet provides an unlimited ability to “sample” or re- envision existing works of other artists creating unwitting collaborators as well as issues of authorship and originality. How we see and view the digital world as opposed to the physical, from losses of tactility, the translation of color, even changes in attention spans, have impacted the field of printmaking and the wider world of art. Are artists beginning to exploit some of these perceived negatives to create new images and collaborations? Have some print artists found freedom to create beyond the traditional print now that images can be so easily reproduced? Have print artists responded to the digital by moving beyond the traditional print to the post-print? How is the visual seen on different screens and formats, with each device creating a different “navigation” of the image? Can this be an aspect of exploration? How are print artists utilizing digital strategies to create objects that exist in the physical and virtual worlds?

Keywords:

Introduction

It is impossible to ignore the tremendous changes to printmaking practice brought about through digital print technology. For centuries, printmaking involved labor-intensive processes: carving a woodblock, scribing metal, grinding limestone. Prints were, and many continue to be, created through physical engagement with the materials. How can those of us who are artists working with these materials not relate to the sensory cues of our printmaking practices? The smells, feel, sounds and sight of our materials become a part of our being, inseparable from our lives as artists.

Advances in digital technology now allow anyone with an inkjet or laser printer the ability to create a form of print at the touch of a button. The intensive physical labor involved has been replaced by the cerebral. The artist determines conceptual and visual outcomes on the computer monitor with the aid of sophisticated and ever-changing software platforms. These new technologies have expanded, and continue to expand, the boundaries of printmaking.

Far more pervasive have been the changes the digital revolution has wrought throughout culture and society. Computers and mobile digital devices like smart phones, connected through high-speed data networks, create the ability to access information and people almost anywhere at any time. The basic Google search provides access to more information and knowledge than anyone could learn in multiple lifetimes. Regular use of the Internet has been shown in some research to positively affect cognitive processing and how the brain encodes information. Humans have been freed of the need to memorize vast mundane details such as phone numbers, addresses, or directions, by simply querying our personal digital assistant Siri. These technologies have changed the way we learn and methods of learning; they have altered how we work, when we work, and where we work. Concepts of recreation and leisure have also altered significantly and irrevocably as distinctions between work and leisure have blurred. In short, the entire matrix of society and culture has altered or begun to alter. Few, if any, cultures in the world have not been impacted by these changes. Within the next decades, no culture will remain unchanged as networks expand and devices become cheaper. There has been a “flattening” of cultural differences as TV, media, Internet, and the World Wide Web have become pervasive. The digital revolution is over; the digital age is upon us.

Multiples and Dissemination

One of the most important characteristics of printmaking, as William Ivin’s stated in his seminal book *Prints and Visual Communication*, is the ability to create “exactly repeatable images,” in other words, the ability to

create multiples.¹ Artists working with prints have exploited reproducibility to display and market their work across large distances. The creation of communities through the sharing of prints with others in the field is equally important for many artists and the phenomena of the exchange portfolio, especially in the United States, fulfills this desire. As technology expanded and became the dominant mode of communication in the developed world, exchange portfolios increased exponentially.

Developing Communities through Portfolio Exchanges

Melanie Yazzie, an artist from Boulder, Colorado, U.S., has made the organization of, participation in, and exhibition of prints from exchange portfolios, a significant part of her artistic practice. Over a 10-15 year period, she estimates she has arranged approximately 120 exchanges, building communities of hundreds of artists regionally, nationally and internationally. Portfolio exchanges existed long before the advent of digital communication but without the ease, low cost, and prevalence of digital networks, it is impossible to imagine the sheer number of exchanges that can be found now. These exchanges exploit the inherent multiplicity of prints but they do not fundamentally change the nature of the physical print. Exchanges do have a profound impact on the field by creating an opportunity for individual artists to engage in the world without limitations of location by drawing widely dispersed practitioners together, providing a wider network for dissemination of the artist's work, and creating a resource for future generations to study and appreciate.

A Digital Exchange

The 2012 exhibition *Phoning It in from Yoyakarta*, curated by Lee Tussman at Space 1026 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, removed the need to distribute prints through the mail, as required by exchange portfolios. Image files of hand created prints and other types of 2 dimensional artworks were sent via e-mail from Indonesia to the United States. These image files were printed onto paper on a standard desktop printer and displayed in the gallery, proving that no longer does an artist's physical location need determine his or her existence. As the curator José Roca observed, we are becoming "a society of reproduction, where culture is experienced mainly, at times even solely, through its virtual or actual surrogates."²

Influences of the Digital Display

Eli McGlothern, a Master of Fine Arts student in the School of Art at Arizona State University, creates work that embraces the characteristics

¹ William M. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Visual Communication*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 3.

² José Roca, "The Graphic Unconscious or the How and Why of a Print Triennial," The Graphic Unconscious, (Philadelphia: Philagrafika, 2011) 25. Print.

peculiar to the digital and the devices on which an image might be displayed or printed. His digitally created images, filled with the indistinct and pervasive images from advertisements and the popular culture of his childhood, are extremely simplified in color, texture, and shape to better display on a digital device, especially the artist's intended display on a smaller hand held device. The image is sent to the audience's smart phone or tablet where it may be viewed in its entirety or in part. If viewed in sections, as it almost certainly must be, the individual viewer's navigation around or through the image becomes paramount to the experience of seeing. This navigation through an image interferes with spatial reasoning. The artist loses control of the image as one selectively enlarges or reduces the size of elements and creates new compositions framed by the edges of the digital device, radically altering the "reading" of an image. Original meaning and authorship become subverted through these changes. In an attempt to simulate the "reading" of an image on a small digital device, McGlothorn also printed the image from a desk top printer in its entirety in large scale but in sections, complete with the white borders associated with printing on this type of printer. As is often the case with reproductions, there is a shift of scale between the 2 formats. When viewing the image assembled on the wall as a more traditional image on paper, the audience experiences some of the same segmentation of the digitally displayed image but none of the possibility of customization provided through navigation on a digital device. In accordance with the Gestalt theory of closure, the brain completes the image where visual information is missing to create the artist's original composition. In the digital format, the image is ephemeral; the digital device is inserted in the viewer's physical space and takes on the role of object. In the printed format, the print is the physical object.

McGlothorn's digitally printed image, or those in the previously discussed exhibition *Phoning it in from Yoyakarta*, have good clarity, color, and retain the artists' composition and meaning. In theory, digital images of prints, whether on paper or on a screen, should be endlessly repeatable, however, slight changes in the digital file or features of the digital device can cause minute or significant perceptual changes. Hue and value may shift from the artist's original composition. One of the main alterations is a loss of the tactile as the digital device becomes the object rather than the print. If, as George P. Landow asserted in the introduction to the 1994 book of essays *Hyper/Text/Theory*, the movement from the tactile to the digital is the primary fact about the contemporary world, then the disembodied image on a digital display, completes this move.¹ Humans, however, have a fundamental desire not only for meaning but also for sensory pleasure, including that of the tactile. Surveys and consumer reports indicate sensory experiences are important and matter significantly to readers when comparing a digital reading device to a book on paper, lending validity to this hypothesis. The disembodied digital

¹ George P. Landow, "What's a Critic to Do? Critical Theory in the Age of Hypertext," *Hyper/Text/Theory*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) Print.

image does not provide fulfillment of the universal sensory desire for tactility in either a book or a print.

Post-Digital Printmaking

Many print based artists have embraced a range of digital tools, from CNC routers to water jets to laser cutters, to facilitate and expand their studio practices while remaining true to the traditions of printmaking to create a print on paper with all of the characteristics and tactility of those produced through older techniques. In the book Post-Digital Printmaking, Paul Catanese and Angela Geary wrote that this type of print “navigate(s) a crossover zone where computer technology affects the material realm and where digitally mediated and traditional processes collaborate.”¹ The “post-digital” form of printmaking re-humanizes the digital by transforming the digital technologies back to the physical world.

Moving Beyond the Picture Plane

As both digital and printed images have become more widely available than ever before, some print based artists have sought to move beyond the picture plane as object and into the exhibition space itself, pushing the boundaries of printmaking with print-based installations or “printstallations,” a term coined to describe the art form and embraced by a growing number of artists, writers, and scholars. Installations of all kinds, with their insistence on what New York based critic Charles Schultz phrased the “be-here-now” to refer to the emphasis on the singular experience, stand in opposition to the disembodied digital by exploiting physical space.²

Printmaking, with its dependence on the 2 dimensional picture plane and tradition of multiples, seems at odds with installation art’s insistence on the “be-here-now.” However, printmaking’s inherent ability to reutilize the matrices to create new works in new combinations ad infinitum is one of its primary attractions for artists choosing to create print based installations. Notable practitioners of the print based installation include Nancy Spero, who should be acknowledged for her significant contributions to the development of the art form, and a newer generation of artists, including Swoon and Nicola Lopez. Each of these artists has created a lexicon or stockpile of matrices from which to create new works.³

¹ Paul Catanese & Angela Geary, *Post Digital Printmaking: CNC, Traditional and Hybrid Techniques*. (London: A & C Black) 19.

² Charles Schulz. “A Matrix You Can Move In: Prints & Installation Art.” *Art in Print*. Sept.-Oct. 2011: no page. artinprint.org. Web. 12 August 2015.

³ Sarah Kirk Hanley, “Ink/The Lexicon of Tomorrow: Print-Based Installation.” *Art 21 Magazine*. 8 April 2011: no page. blog.art21.org. Web. Accessed 21 June 2015.

Searching for the Center: An Installation

This ability to use the matrices available for new works in new combinations has been a consistent and dominant element of my own studio practice and can be seen in my 2012 installation *searching for the center*. This installation signifies the universal journey of seeking meaning, inner essence, essential reality or, as the psychiatrist and psychologist Karl Jung referred to it, the wholeness within. The images of DNA, blood cells, and even the molecular structure of water, are indicative of science, one of the ways, through which contemporary society seeks understanding and meaning in life. The labyrinth and mandala represent a more spiritual seeking.

The installation utilizes screen-printed and repeated images throughout. Microcomputers installed in the base of the platforms, are programmed to randomly and slowly undulate the soft lights within to help establish a contemplative space, one where we can “search for the center.” While this installation is firmly rooted in printmaking, and would not exist without those elements, the work only exists as a conceptual whole within the space of the gallery. The audience must move within the physical space of the work itself to experience the piece in totality.

Conclusion

Tremendous changes have indeed affected our lives and the field of printmaking in part or in whole due to advances in technology. Far from diminishing the field, as the term “post-print” might infer, many print based artists, or printmakers have embraced the new technologies as additional tools for their creative toolbox, while others have continued to expand printmaking into the broader art dialogue through installations and other forms, such as video or performances. The history of printmaking spans centuries. As long as artists in the field continue to evolve and to seek meaning, it will remain a vital and relevant art form in the coming centuries.

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