

Print, making and the work of art alone. Professor Paul Coldwell

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This paper will consider the relationship of print to the transmission of ideas through the multiple. This will include the changing role of the print studio and how artists are increasingly viewing print as an opportunity to produce work, which is distinct and resolved within the medium of print.

I want to look at the changing role of print, not only for the way it can be the meeting place for technologies, but also for its position as a place of cross over between commercial and the aesthetic worlds. Furthermore, how artists are increasingly viewing print as an opportunity to produce work, which is both distinct and resolved within the medium of print.

The history of printmaking covers a broad range of concerns, from those artists who have sought expression through the particular nature of the medium as well as those for whom print's capacity to produce multiple images has been paramount. Of course print has always engaged a wide audience; that audience early on would have included those for whom the written word was out of their sphere, either through illiteracy or class. In medieval times, the small woodcut, cheaply printed and often sold at fairs would function not only as a souvenir but as means to understand the feeling of, for example, the gospels or connect with the potency of a particular saint with the print functioning as devotional object.

Increasingly, it was through print that not only aesthetic ideas became currency, but also cartographical, philosophical, anatomical, medical etc. all translated through the skills of printmakers into images that could be reproduced and distributed. Printmaking has always had this mixed history. It has both its own fine art history, articulated by the mantra of key figures such as Durer, Rembrandt, Goya, Degas, Picasso, and Warhol etc. and with their association with particular technical innovations, etching, aquatint, lithography, silkscreen, describe a different set

of historical steps to that of painters and sculptors. But in addition print has been embedded within a myriad of other histories and disciplines.

So for every print which had aesthetic imperatives as its primary concern, such as Durer's *Horseman of the apocalypse*, there were thousands of prints functioning as playing cards, maps, architectural studies, anatomical sheets, studies of flora and fauna, diagrams of the heavens, to name but a few, all crafted by printmakers, the commercial artists of their day. And of course print didn't confine itself to ink on paper, print was transferred all kinds of surfaces including ceramics, textiles and wallpaper. So while this talk will focus on my particular position as a fine artist printmaker, it is important to remember this wider perspective.

But before considering some examples of contemporary practice, I want to mention three historical figures whose influence is still acutely felt and who have helped shape and define printmaking now.

In Holland, in the early 15th century, Hercules Seghers or Segers (c. 1589 – c. 1638) developed a radical approach to etching. Rather than regarding the plate as simply the matrix to achieve a fixed result, Seghers used the plate as an opportunity to experiment and valued the fact that multiple results from a single matrix were possible. Not only did he experiment with ways of inking and papers, but also it is also evident that he saw the metal plate as having material characteristics, distinct from paper that could be exploited. Whilst the convention was to see the plate as surface to apply a rational measured technique of engraving, Seghers realized that the action of the acid on the metal could itself be regarded as a drawing tool. Rembrandt, himself a collector of Seghers prints and who apparently owned one of Seghers's actual plates capitalized on this experimental approach. Printmaking, and here we are referring to etching and engraving, was no longer simply a means of reproduction but an expanding language with ways of image making unique to itself.

Over 200 years later, Edgar Degas used print as a means to privately explore his compositions and image making. His prints exist in numerous stages and reveal the manner in which he restlessly worked the plates and subjected the images to dramatic change. In many ways, Degas can be seen as the father of contemporary print, for him it was a self reflective process, exploring the medium

for personal experimentation and establishing a dynamic relationship within his whole oeuvre, paintings, pastels, drawings, sculptures and prints, each both distinct and connected.

Degas is also important as an example to show how tastes can change; Degas prints were rarely shown in his lifetime, the only prints of his images in circulation were those made by professional printers, after his paintings or drawings. *'The distinction between the handcrafted original, reproductive prints, and the photomechanical reproduction thus came to be increasingly blurred in the public's mind in the early 1880's. For many, it was the image and not how it was produced that mattered; whether a print came directly from the artist's hand was not seen to affect its desirability.'* (Reed, 1984)ⁱ Now, we have seen a change of understanding and taste, and what is valued predominantly is the engagement of the artist in the process of making the matrix. It was also a key moment in history when photography and other new technologies were replacing traditional printmaking as the means of making multiple reproductions. According to Douglas Druick and Peter Davies writing in *Edgar Degas; The Painter as Printmaker, (1984)* *'As new media displaced the old as the primary means of disseminating images, the traditional media were redefined in purpose. The print ceased to be an adjunct of industry and now found its raison d'être as work of art alone.'* (Reed, 1984)ⁱⁱ

No one has exploited this new freedom more than Picasso. In every arena of art, Picasso innovated and in his hands printmaking became a new language and a language that he was willing to share. If Picasso were an automobile, it would have no reverse gear, just relentlessly forward. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his print work where it seems that every stage was both a resolved image but also a starting point for further exploration. Over and again, Picasso would rework his plates and stones, not I believe with the intention of reaching a single conclusion, but as a means of inquiry. In the iconic set of lithographs, *The Bull*, made between 5th December 1945 and 17th January 1946 at Fernand Mourlot's studio, Picasso explains his language of abstraction stage-by-stage, revealing the process of synthesis from image to essence, the bull gradually reduced down to its simplest form.

But there were still predominantly two predominant models for fine art printmaking.

Firstly the artist printmaker. This is the artist who makes their own prints and develops a language based on refining a range of skills and more often than not, a particular technique. An artist like

Giorgio Morandi would fit into this model. An artists who drew, etched and proofed his own plates. Was very knowledgeable about paper, ink different mordents and taught printmaking in Bologna. While Morandi had a dual practice of painting and printmaking, there are others for whom printmaking became their prime activity, Michael Rothenstein, Tim Mara, Bartholomew dos Santos and contemporary artists such as Ian Brown and Christiane Baumgartner to mention just a few. These artists made their own prints and in most cases would print the edition. Print biennials throughout the world predominantly focus on this category, the biennial seen as one way of distributing their images.

Secondly, there is the artist as painter or sculptor who is invited by either their gallery or independent publisher to make some prints frequently based on their work in other media. Here, the artist would be aligned with a printer or atelier based on a publisher's hunch of what technique would be most appropriate and what personalities would work together. The printer would in most cases be a specialist in one technique or process, Aldo Crommelynck for example, a specialist in intaglio, or Chris Prater, in screenprinting. Importantly, the publisher was invariably separate from the atelier.

But in the late 1950's early 60's fine art printmaking experienced something akin to a paradigm shift, moving away from these previous models of operation into something more experimental and collaborative and creating a new set of relationships between the artist, printer publisher and studio. Heralding this change, Pat Gilmour noted '*The 20th century then, has seen prints daring to be themselves, under the joint banners of 'truth to materials' and 'originality' as well by the gradual admission of photographically mediated images into the canon of aesthetic respectability.*'(Gilmour and Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978)ⁱⁱⁱ

The revolution occurred in America against a backdrop of New York superseding Paris as the centre of art. 1957 was the date that Tatyana Grosman started ULAE in New York and on her insistence '*introduced the graphic media (screenprinting & lithography) to artists who not only were principally interested in painting and sculpture rather than printmaking but were in fact sometimes hostile to the meticulous 'cooking' that printmaking often requires.*' (Fine and Corlett, 1992) ^{iv}

While ULAE was based in New York, the art capital, the renaissance in printmaking had its epicenter on the west coast with workshops such as Gemini and Tamarind. The west coast was the home of the aeronautical industry, NASA was established in 1958, San Francisco was the centre for the counter culture and of course Hollywood was the centre for the movie industry. Together these helped form a climate that meant the impossible was possible and where dreams could become reality. Indeed Gemini, the workshop founded by Ken Tyler in the mid 60's was, according to Pat Gilmour, dubbed '*the Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer of print workshops*'. (Gilmour, 1986)^v Importantly, these new studios were also functioning as publishers so the relationship between everyone involved changed founded on a sense of collaboration and daring. '*Artists began to question traditional distinctions between mediums, creating works that couldn't clearly be associated with any of them. If more artists began to incorporate print processes in their work, they often did so as part of a larger practice, considering prints to be on equal footing with, for example, drawing or photography.*' (Cherix)^{vi} A feeling endorsed by Gill Saunders and Rosie Miles as they described how these studios '*encouraged artists to explore the potential of printmaking, and to use it to produce works that represent major breakthroughs as creative statements, placing print, arguably for the first time, alongside sculpture and painting as a primary means of expression.*' (Miles and Saunders, 2006)^{vii}

Robert Rauschenberg had been persuaded by Tatyana Grosman to try his hand at printmaking at ULAE and an example of this new spirit, while working on one particular stone, it broke in two in the press and rather than abandon it, printed it complete with its white fracture, entitled it *Accident* and it duly was awarded first prize at The Ljubljana Biennial in 1963. A few years later, Rauschenberg produced *Booster* at Gemini G.E.L, Los Angeles that according to Ruth E Fine, '*virtually redefined the possibilities of size and scale in contemporary prints. Until then, prints had generally been small and intimate. With Booster they began to rival paintings in terms of their size and powerful presence on a wall.*' (Fine and Art, 1985)^{viii} *Booster* combined screenprint with four colour lithography both from stone and plate and included a life size x ray of the artist in his boots '*pushing the collaborative effort beyond any limits one could have predicted or anticipated.*' (Fine and Art, 1985)^{ix}

Of course it would be wrong to claim that America invented big prints, Dürer's monumental woodcut, *The Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I.* completed in 1517, was made from 192

separate blocks, cut over a period of two years by Hieronymus Andreae of Nuremberg and measures almost ten metres squared is just one historical example, but there was a clear sense that from the 60's printmaking was making a claim for same freedoms as were being claimed for painting and sculpture.

These workshops also heralded a change in the relationship with the artist. Rather than the artist fitting into the workshop, there seems to be a sense that the studio was configured around the artists needs. No where is this more apparent than with Ken Tyler who in pursuit of an artists requirements would go to almost any length to satisfy those needs. Here Ken Tyler offers an insight into this new way of working. *'The workshop adopted the practice of team printing and often all of the staff was employed to build a Stella print in ever-increasing size and complexity. The largest is The Fountain, 1992, a mural work in an edition of 8 that measures 7.5 by 23 feet. It is a masterful 67 color woodcut, etching, aquatint, relief, screenprint, drypoint, collage, print hand-colored on three sheets of handmade paper that took fifteen printers a year and half to make. For this project I had a custom-made 500-ton hydraulic press with a printing bed size of 92 x 130 inches.'*^x

A further change occurred in the consideration of the print as an object in the same way that painting was regarded. Prior to the 60,s certainly in Europe, paper was regarded as the substrate to receive the image and whilst I am in no way inferring that there wasn't due consideration for the best paper to receive a lithograph or etching or that paper wasn't produced with particular projects in mind, the paper was predominantly subordinate to the image. Tatyana Grossman at ULAE personified the importance of the paper as a fundamental ingredient of the print.

'She was a fanatic about choosing the right paper, so much so that the supply of a particular handmade paper would limit the size of an edition. One reason that the Rivers-O'Hara 'Stones' took two years to edition was the time it took the papermaker Douglass Howell to fabricate the special sheets.' (Hansen, Mickenberg, and Moser, 1995)^{xi}

Now there is a long tradition, most notably in France of the Livres d'artist, the beautifully made publications bringing together artists with poets or writers. In addition, the folio of prints by an artist on a theme was a relatively common way of packaging and distributing prints to collectors. Folios could easily be stored in plan chests and brought out to show. But as art practice moved

away from the idea of the singular masterpiece and towards bodies of work around a particular theme or approach, the artist's folio increasingly becomes a way of more truly representing artist's ideas than a single sheet. Furthermore the series or sequence of prints, not only can represent artists approach to a broad range of issues such as seriality, sequence and variation, but can also present a body of work which can hold its own in terms of scale and presence with large paintings etc. preserves a body of work around a single idea in perpetuity. I would argue that this is one of the most important aspects of the contemporary printmaking.

As an example I would like to consider a small portfolio *Gymnasium Chases*, a portfolio of 24 photogravures in a metal box published by Crown Point Press in 1991 by the artist Christian Boltansky. The box measures approx. 24 x 16.5 inches so this is not a large work.

Boltansky is an artist for whom installation is central to his practice and *Gymnasium Chases* acts as an equivalent. All you need to know is contained within the box. Indeed the box itself, a simple metal storage box immediately locates this work within the realms of filing systems or archival storage. The box prepares the viewer. Inside are 24 photogravures. On one sheet, which acts as a colophon, there is a landscape format group photograph of 23 adolescent children and below that, arranged in a square is the following text

‘ They are assembled for the last time. It is the end of the year, they are students at the Gymnasium Chases, a Jewish high School in Vienna, the year is 1931. What became of them all after all these years, what kind of lives have they had? One amongst them is identified in this photograph, he escaped the horror and lives today in New York, of the others I know nothing.’

On each of the other 23 sheets are photogravure images of each face, enlarged from the original group photograph and as a consequence, degraded. The photogravures seem like ghosts, black holes where eyes should be. The viewer is invited to match the individual images with the faces in the group. In *Gymnasium Chases*, Boltanski has created a take away installation. The 24 prints allow for a variety of presentations, single line, 2 rows of 12, 3 rows of 8 or 4 rows of 6. The colophon can be at the beginning or the end. While the colophon, draws the viewer in to read the text and scrutinize the photograph, the single images compel the viewer to step back and try to

focus these phantoms. This work focuses on that moment between individuality and the crowd, where individual histories can become subsumed by generalizations and racial assumptions. What begins as an innocent end of year school photograph, the kind that we look to for signs of potential and future achievements, is here closed down, confined to a cold metal box.

Barthélémy TOGUO also uses print within the language of installation. In *All The World's Futures*, a variation on an theme that he has been shown in a variety of configurations including *The new world climax* (2000) he powerfully evokes the tradition of African carving, but here, to engage with the most straightforward form of printmaking, the woodcut. We are presented with the matrix as sculptural object, the large wooden carved rubber stamps, each containing a word or phrase taken from customs stamps. We have entered the world of giants; each wooden stamp could crush us. But these are functional matrixes and from these, simple black and white prints are taken and either printed on individual sheets or together as a composite.

These works draws on many references, the wood grain, so pronounced, that the tree's rings of growth takes on the form of the finger print, the cross section being the tree's equivalent, the industrially produced rubber stamps are here hand carved, greatly enlarged as expressive gestural objects that one would associate with expressive African carving, both traditional and that produced for the tourist trade. Of course it is also about the very authority that printing gives to the word, here greatly enlarged and with the weight of each wooden stamp, the power of authority and one suspects prejudice is tellingly felt. Is it interesting in this regard to see the tiny wood engraving *The Returning Cottager*, made in 1797 by the British artist Thomas Bewick for the book *British Birds*. The fingerprint, here depicted against a small country scene, is fractionally larger than the actual thumbprint. Here the finger marks the presence of the artist, and indeed functions as his signature.

Presence and its opposite, absence is very much at the heart of the billboard project by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Here Gonzalez-Torres uses the street and more specifically the billboard to share ideas of great intimacy and personal loss with a wide community, many of whom would not find the gallery space a place they would gravitate towards. In *Untitled* 1991, huge posters of an image of his unmade bed, still with the impressions the occupants in the pillows were displayed in various sites across New York. The pale intimate image is in direct contrast to the backdrop of the

urban city landscape and challenges our expectations that as a poster there is something to be sold. Instead it is used to share, in this case the grief and intimacy of his partner dying of aids. Elgar Dietmor explains '*Felix Gonzalez-Torres is advertising something that is precisely not to be consumed but can only be sought after, something that cannot be bought by, but can only be given to, someone.*'^{xii} There is also perhaps a reference to the 1963 mural by Andy Warhol, *The 13 Most Wanted Men*, a commission which appeared briefly on the exterior of the New York State Pavilion at the New York World's Fair but caused immediate controversy and within 24 hours had been painted over.

Gonzalez-Torres's sense of exchange is also played out in his *Stack* pieces. Here, stacks of prints are displayed in a gallery, unsigned, un-numbered, as if in a warehouse awaiting collection. They also reference minimalist sculptures, their simple regular structure echoing those forms favored by Don Judd and Carl Andre. However, unlike minimalist sculpture where touch and inconsistency were frowned upon, Gonzalez-Torres's stacks invite interaction and human touch. They are unlimited editions in that the gallery is committed to replenish the stack as the public removes them. The certificates that authenticate these works include the 'ideal' height' the paper, weight of paper and what is printed and how. As an inversion of the poster as a thing advertising something outside of itself, a holiday, a car a type of beer, Gonzalez-Torres' prints only sell themselves. The prints once removed by visitors find alternative existences as posters on bedroom walls, in frames or discarded on the street. They challenge any notion of single ownership and become part of the flotsam of the city. As with the Billboard project, these prints slowly assimilate themselves into the city and into the community. '*I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it away with them was very exciting.*'^{xiii} As the artist stated, '*Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in.*' Both in the billboard and the stack pieces, the idea of ownership is contested.

Sarah Sze is an artist whose reputation rests on her enigmatic unfolding installations which seem to hover somewhere between chance and order. In her recent exhibition at Victoria Miro Gallery in London she also presented a compelling series of prints *Midnight Series*, which took a single moment in time, midnight at the beginning of the year 2014, as its start. She took a newspaper

from twelve cities on that date, cut out the pictures from the front page and replaced them with images of the night sky at midnight. Seen together they function as a pictorial time clock. These images, made as collages have been reconstituted as prints.

The newspapers which would otherwise yellow, go brittle and eventually degrade have been remade through screenprint and the rectangular spaces that once had photographs, have been laser cut to provide windows for screenprinted night skies. While it could be argued that these are merely reproductions of the original collages, for me the attention of the process of remaking these as prints heightens our sense of the uniqueness of the moment, in this case, the striking of midnight and the effort to preserve that moment and take it into the future. The prints evoke a precise moment in time and space and mark its passing. And of course, now as multiple prints, able to be shown at the same time in any number of locations and not owned by any single individual. And for all the particular qualities of print, its capacity to distribute ideas and remain independent of single ownership perhaps remains the most important.

ⁱ Reed, S. W. W. (1984) *Edgar Degas: The painter as Printmaker*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston. p. xv'

ⁱⁱ *Abid* p. Ivi

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilmour, P. and Arts Council of Great Britain (1978) *The Mechanised image: An historical perspective on 20th century prints*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain. p28

^{iv} Fine, R. E. and Corlett, M. L. L. (1992) *Graphicstudio: Contemporary art from the collaborative workshop at the university of south Florida*. Germany: Te Neues Pub Group. p11

^v Gilmour, P. (1986) *Ken Tyler, master printer, and the American print renaissance*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Australian National Gallery. p 7

^{vi} Cherix, Christophe, (2012) *Print/Out*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, , p14

^{vii} Miles, R. and Saunders, G. (2006) *Prints now: Directions and definitions*. LONDON: Victoria and Albert Museum. p8

^{viii} Fine, R. and Art, N. G. of (1985) *Gemini G.E.L.: Art and collaboration*. 1st edition. Washington, D.C: Abbeville Press Inc.,U.S. p48.

^{ix} *Abid* p39

^x <http://tylerblogs.com/?s=stella>

^{xi} Hansen, T. V., Mickenberg, D. and Moser, J. (1995) *Printmaking in America: Collaborative prints and presses, 1960-1990*. New York: H.N. Abrams in association with Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University.

^{xii} Dietmor, Elgar, (1997) *Felix Gonzalez -Torres Catalogue Raisonne* Cantz Verlag, Germany p.18

^{xiii} Felix Gonzalez-Torres interviewed by Robert Storr in *ArtPress* Jan 1995 p.13