

Title	Hybrid practices within printmaking
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/9331/
Date	2015
Citation	Coldwell, Paul (2015) Hybrid practices within printmaking. Journal of Visual Art Practice, 14 (3). pp. 175-178. ISSN 1470-2029
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Hybrid Practices within Printmaking

The following papers were originally presented as part of a symposium held at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London on Friday 24th April 2005. This was a joint event between Chelsea College of Arts and Bergen Academy of Art & Design, convened and chaired by Professor Paul Coldwell.

The symposium addressed a range of approaches to printmaking in which ideas and intentions are allied to process and technique, resulting in what can best be described as hybrid practices. Current practice draws upon a rich history of printmaking both in terms of technique and the means through which images, as vehicles for ideas and emotions, are distributed. With the advent of digital technologies, the opportunities for artists to combine processes and approaches has never been greater.

Introduction

The Graduate School at CCW, (University of the Arts London) is committed to four related research themes: environment, technologies, social engagement and identities. These themes underpin the public programme of events and this symposium is no exception. In each of the presentations, while addressing the main focus, that of hybrid practices within printmaking these underlying themes will be touched on either directly or more obliquely and not as a polemic or in a self conscious way, but as integrated into the speaker's practice and thinking.

It has been my belief that printmaking is wonderfully positioned to provide a space in which crossovers between ideas, technology, and process can occur. Hybrid Practices I view as a contemporary phenomenon within printmaking whereby the artist, rather than being steered by a developed skill set, begins with ideas and seeks the most appropriate means to express them. Richard Hamilton, an artist who always seemed to begin by questioning which medium would be best suited to express the idea or address a problem, said *A medium need not sit in isolated purity. It has always been my contention that the first objective is to achieve a compelling image and that aim demands a felicity in its implementation.*ⁱ

As a space for crossover, the print room has traditionally been a place where disparate and sometimes it must be said, desperate artists have gathered, brought together by the communal use of equipment or the technical specialism of a master printer or simply the need to be with other artists and forge new friendships. I have always liked the American expression, print shop as opposed to print studio, with its invitation to enter irrespective of ideology, hierarchy or stylistic preferences. The print shop also offers a space to observe, to learn from the experience of others, be it to follow or to find an alternative means of expression. For the most part, the only rules being, respect for the other users and don't break anything that can't be mended.

The printshop is a space in which learning occurs on a multiplicity of levels. I

myself remember learning how to ink and wipe an etching plate from watching the great Portuguese printmaker Barto dos Santos as a student at the Slade School of art. I remember him going into automatic mode and slapping the plate with the palm of his hand as he wiped off the ink, while simultaneously discussing the plans for the Slade Christmas party.ⁱⁱ It took me quite a while to emulate this apparently simple action and in fact it was only once I mastered, it that I remembered learning it by watching him in the first place.

While detractors have regarded printmaking as predominately craft based, print has made a profound contribution to the history of the dissemination of ideas through both text and image and indeed it is impossible to imagine a world without print. Significantly Susan Tallman, the editor in chief of *Art in Print* appropriated the quotation by Leo Steinberg *without prints you don't understand the culture of the world*ⁱⁱⁱ as the motto for the launch of her journal.

It is worth recalling that it was through engravings that the visual and intellectual propositions of the renaissance spread across Europe, it was through etching and lithography that Goya found a means to articulate his horror at man's inhumanity to man and more recently, how silkscreen provided the perfect means for Warhol to express his desire to be like a machine and represent to us the world of product and celebrity. Now in this digital age, the computer has enabled us not only to think new thoughts and challenge how we print but also to revisit previous technologies to form hybrids. The contemporary printmaker has a beguiling range of possibilities at their disposal.

Each of the artists presenting or discussed today, uses print to bring together their ideas matched with technology in surprising ways. What also singles them out is the appropriateness of their means of expression to their intentions.

Annette and Caroline Keirulf work together on a common project, with the declared aims 'to develop the woodcut, one of the oldest forms of printmaking and information technology, to become a contemporary medium for critical artistic practice'.^{iv} Each works independently, addressing the aims of the project through individually authored works and joint exhibitions. They fascinatingly approach issues which include, ecology, politics, new technology and the speed of received data, through woodcut, the earliest means of making a multiple printed image. In their work they contrast the immediacy of contemporary data exchange, the seemingly endless flow of propaganda, statistics and issues with the slow manual production of their elegant and disarming hand made prints. Annette in her paper focuses on the nature of their collaboration, ecology, the importance of place and the relationship between text and image. Caroline considers temporality, the economy, working processes and the dualities of making and thinking. Together they provide rare insights into a close working partnership from two distinct perspectives and provide a model for a very distinct collaboration based upon printmaking and social engagement.

Jo Love discusses her own work which has developed out of her practice-based PhD, entitled *Dust* completed at the University of the Arts London in 2012. She

considers the idea of surface and how drawing, print and photography can be used to challenge our readings of space. Love's work is rooted in landscape, often using photographic sources drawn from family archives. Her landscapes are unpopulated and reduced to the point where mere traces of the original photographic source are just enough to fix the images as being landscape. Not content with the image as rendered through inkjet, Love has felt compelled to work onto the surface of these prints with drawing, simulating the presence of dust and detritus in order to bring the viewer's attention to the surface nature of the images.

In contrast to Jo Love, Ellen Heck's work is small in scale and intimate. In 2014 at the International Print Biennale in Newcastle, she was awarded both the Northern Print International Residency Prize and the V&A Print Prize for her series of prints, *Forty Fridas*. In her own words, *Forty Fridas is a series of forty woodcut etchings depicting women and girls dressed up as painter/icon, Frida Kahlo. This project, while in some respects a very intimate collection of personal portraits, touches more broadly on themes of identity, the multiple, individuality and variation. With this portfolio, as with much of my current body of work, I am using the printmaking process to highlight these concepts, which are referenced both in the subject matter and the medium.*^v In her paper Heck discusses the evolution of this project and opens up her working method for scrutiny. She describes how she works with drypoint as the key drawn element and how the subsequent wood blocks enable her to evoke feelings through colour. This is by no means an easy task as noted by Gill Saunders 'drypoint and colour woodcut are challenging and labor intensive, their effects innately fugitive and hard to control and predict.'^{vi} *Forty Fridas* touch on contemporary themes of identity, the multiple, individuality and of the way in which print is the ideal medium to explore series and variation, offering as it does, an infinite range of possibilities from each matrix. In addition to her hybrid process and the obvious homage to Frida Kahlo as implicit in the series's title. Heck also places herself within a wider context of printmaking, most notably relating to the intimate portraits of women, by Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) who herself fell, under the influence of the growth of interest in the west of Japanese woodcut prints.

Woodcut prints on another scale lead us to the work of Christiane Baumgartner, one of those rare artists that have established an international reputation, almost exclusively based on her practice as a printmaker.^{vii} Christian Rümelin is ideally situated to provide insights into her practice, as the curator of *White Noise*,^{viii} the recent retrospective exhibition of her work shown at the Museum of Art & History in Geneva where he is the keeper of prints.

Rümelin discusses how her work evolves and the complex process that takes her from a source image, such as a video still, through computer manipulation to an image that can be traced down onto a large woodblock. This then forms the guide for her meticulously cut woodcuts. This hybrid practice, which begins with the instantaneous digital image capture ends with months of handcutting to prepare the wooden block for being inked and hand printed onto fine Japanese paper. Rümelin, points to the parallels between her horizontal swallowing lines

and the horizontal structure of TV and video and through this suggests that it is time and the representation of motion that are two prominent themes within her work. It is once again paradoxical that Baumgartner, by returning to a technology that was used even before the advent of the printing press, the hand printed woodcut, is able to reinvent the process and put it at the service of a very contemporary interrogation of anxiety and perception in a digital age.

These papers offers insights into how these artists have approached printmaking in order to place it at the service of their intentions and hopefully will give a flavor of a symposium that was marked by the generosity of both the speakers and audience to engage. The symposium also demonstrates how printmaking can serve an overall political or social imperative, how it can be a site for formal experimentation, a means of reflecting on such current obsessions as identity and image and indeed how print need never be confined by such practicalities as the size of a press.

Professor Paul Coldwell

ⁱ Richard Hamilton *New technology and printmaking*, Alan Cristea Gallery, London 1998

ⁱⁱ Bartolomeu Cid dos Santos (August 24, 1931 – May 21, 2008), the renowned Portuguese etcher, taught at the Slade School of Art (UCL) from 1961-96. Paul Coldwell studied under dos Santos, from 1975-77 and then as research assistant from 1978-81.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holland Cotter, *Critic's Notebook; An Audacious Thinker With a Passion for Prints*, published September 10, 2002, The New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/10/arts/critic-s-notebook-an-audacious-thinker-with-a-passion-for-prints.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

^{iv} *The medium as the message; woodcut as cultural critique*. Research and project description by Annette and Caroline Kierulf, 2009, available from www.khib.no

^v <http://ellenheck.com/forty-fridas/>

^{vi} Gill Saunders. *Ellen Heck*. *Art in Print* March-April 2015 vol 4 no 6

^{vii} Paul Coldwell *Christiane Baumgartner: Between States*, *Art in Print* May-June 2011 vol 1, number 1.

^{viii} Christiane Baumgartner, *White Noise*, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva.