



Contemporary Printmaking Art between Marginalisation and Regeneration

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Historically printmaking emerged first as a craft associated with book-making, and then developed as a social anti-aristocratic genre of visual arts. Consequently, printmaking has not acquired the attention and support of the art establishment that other media of visual arts such as painting and sculpture was privileged with. One major critical issue with printmaking is the conventional classification system of visual arts media was based on the notions of 'rarity' and 'authenticity', which may have contributed to the downgrade of the value of printmaking due to its repeatable nature. The consequences of that limiting classification of printmaking are still evident in contemporary art despite the widespread recognition of printmaking as a creative medium of visual arts. The survival of contemporary printmaking art as an art medium depends greatly on the flexibility of embracing the ideological liberation that has changed the contemporary art practice in general, by opening up the printmaking medium to all the creative potentials of interaction, integration, and incorporation with other media of visual arts regardless of the limiting traditional classifications.

Keywords: *Mixed-media Printmaking, Sculptural Printmaking, Print Installation*

Objectives

- 1- To shed light on historical and critical contradictions regarding the classification of printmaking art within the spectrum of visual arts media.
- 2- To discuss the potential future of printmaking art and its relevance and relationship to the contemporary art scene.



3-To investigate the new genres of visual arts that emerged as a result of the incorporation between print and non-print media.

Significance

This research may represent a progression in the way we define and conceive the role of printmaking art today. This research is an attempt to explore the essence of printmaking art as a platform for new creative genres of visual arts. In addition, this research may open the doors to the recognition of the new print-based genres of visual arts as an expansion of traditional printmaking art.

Introduction

Printmaking has originally emerged as a craft of mass-printing and book-making. By the 19th century with the rise of the industrial revolution and the introduction of commercial printing machinery, traditional printmaking process were adapted mainly for artistic proposes and the shift of perception regarding non-industrial printmaking as a medium of visual arts took place. Printmakers were acknowledged as fine artists rather than craftsmen. The print artworks of prominent artists such as the British, William Blake (1757–1827), the Spanish, Francisco de Goya (1746 –1828), and the American, James Whistler (1834 –1903) where highly regarded as artworks equally to their paintings. Nevertheless, by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the role of printmaking in contemporary art has significantly declined. Many contemporary printmaking artists had to drop the title of ‘printmaker’ to distance themselves from the stigma of ‘printmaking’ and to avoid the restrictive judgments of the art critics, gallery owners, art writers, etc. In contrary of visual artists of various media, who are perceived as dominators of the wider arena of contemporary art, printmaking artists are labelled as more technically oriented and less aware of the broader critical dialogue of contemporary visual arts.

In addition, as printmaking involves significant technical aspects, the art itself inherently carries the stigma of artificiality. Unlike other media of visual arts, print artworks are usually produced in multiple editions. Consequently, various media of visual arts are usually perceived as ‘originals’, on the other hand, the printed edition is perceived as ‘copies’. That perception is still evident in today’s visual culture and, since printmaking is conceived as repetitive, it is considered as a minor form of visual arts and it typically receives minor attention by curators, galleries, and art critics. Museums and art galleries very rarely exhibit prints or consider them for acquisition.



Historical Background

The origins of the notion that a printed artwork is somehow intrinsically inferior to the rest of visual arts media, can be traced back to the medieval period, as woodcut prints were often produced merely as replicas of drawings and paintings.

Painting and sculpture have been around longer. Daubing with colour on a cave wall or fashioning artefacts from wood or stone seems a natural and essentially human thing to do. (Piercy 2001)

In addition, historically printmaking was branded as anti-aristocratic and thus developed outside the circle of aristocratic patronage that allowed the “elite arts” of painting and sculpture, to occupy the forefront scene of western visual arts culture.

Within the 19th century, alongside the professional engravers who produced transcriptions of paintings, many artists made prints as a means of reproducing their successful paintings. So even before photography made mass art reproduction possible, printmaking was associated in the collective mind with derivation and repetition.

For many art historians, the distinction between what the printmaking is capable of accomplishing as an art medium, and what it is meant to achieve was too subtle to grasp. The concluded hypothesis was, the printmaking as an art medium is inferior to other media of visual arts instead of, that the printmaking medium was utilised for an inferior purpose of replicating paintings and drawings.

To be placed within the category of “elite art”, an art object must possess certain characteristics such as authenticity, individuality, uniqueness. The notions of authenticity, individuality, uniqueness, and originality of the “elite art” are set against their opposite of the “not art” that is common, commercial, and reproducible.

Printmaking and the Problem of Authenticity

The definition of 'authentic' is 'genuine, authoritative, true, of established credibility, real, and, pure'. The term 'authentic' is defined in contrast to its opposite 'inauthentic', which is the 'spurious, false, fake, or counterfeit', with the first term carrying all the positive, including moral implications. The term 'authentic' is additionally affiliated with presence, uniqueness, originality. Art has always been considered as one of the main cultural territories which preserves and capitalises on the notion of authenticity, but now authenticity is conceived as an important ideological component of the self-definition of art as an establishment.

It is widely believed that the individuality and authenticity of an artwork dominate as indicators of its artistic worth, and consequently qualities such as uniqueness and spontaneity are



considered as hallmarks of the authentic artworks. Within that context, printmaking causes great difficulties related to the definition of categories, while maintaining its right to be categorised within the 'Art' domain. A main characteristic of art replicas is the exhibition of some characteristics of the non-art variety, for instance, the characteristic of multiplicity which is a hallmark of printmaking. Consequently, printmaking art is usually hard to differentiate from the non-art of producing art replicas.

Printmaking artists have always had to address this standard of evaluation. One such compromise was inventing the 'limited edition' print, the rather artificial restriction on the number of the print edition to enforce preciousness and rarity. But multiplicity or popularity are not the sole qualities that condemn the print suspect within this visual arts value system.

Authenticity in printmaking is about the set of rules and parameters which defines what is often considered as an 'original print', in terms of the processes used and therefore the rules governing editions and presentation, this central concern, even obsession, with the media of printmaking still constitutes a massive element of the self-definition of printmaking.

The traditional interpretation of 'authenticity' may contribute to the downgrade of printmaking as a form of art and restrict it to the margin of the contemporary visual arts arena.

The consequences of that limiting definition of printmaking are still evident despite the recognition of printmaking as a creative medium of visual arts within a modernist conception of artistic media of the 20th century.

Since it may require technical processes to manifest the artist's gesture, the authenticity of printmaking is questionable. This viewpoint is reinforced by the concept that highly crafted or skilled artwork is somehow less authentic than the more instantaneous and spontaneous artwork. Since printmaking by nature may involve a calculated process, require foresight and meticulous planning, this type of conscious and rational self-organisational process becomes the antithesis of the creative act. Consequently, printmaking art has always been in a tentative relationship with the established system of art value.

Since the second half of the 20th century, conceptual artists attempted to dismantle the hierarchical system of visual arts. The efforts to radically re-examine the dominant belief that art can only be evaluated based on the principle of uniqueness, have emerged from the rejection of the value system which fetishizes rarity as originality.

The question now is whether the notion of authenticity in printmaking is relevant within the contemporary hybrid print dominion?



The Survival of Printmaking Art

The concept of printmaking expansion to other media has had a growing presence in the artistic system since the end of the 20th century. That expansion has attempted to overcome the historical conventions and the physical dimensions of application, intervention and presentation of the print artwork, as well as its adaptation to the exhibition context in which it manifests itself. (Moro, Martinez 2018)

Now it seems crucial that contemporary printmaking artists embrace the ideological liberation that has changed the contemporary art practice in general, by opening up the medium to all the potentials that are inherently present.

The survival of printmaking art as an art medium depends greatly on utilising the main characteristics that are particular to printmaking, and the most obvious characteristic is multiplicity. The printmaking processes allow the artists to create imageries that are original and meanwhile reproducible. Printmaking may offer the artist a more feasible approach to support him/herself independent from the recognition and sponsorship of the art establishment. Print societies, print associations, and print fairs may represent alternative venues to art galleries and art museums. Printmakers can usually access an audience/market more easily and can bypass the approval of art critics, museums, and art establishments. Current trends of social and political printmaking tend to operate better outside the system of art galleries and museums.

That freedom of printmaking art arguably allows for a greater opportunity for the artist and the audience. Mobility, variety, and affordability offer prints a greater opportunity of exposure and distribution capacity more than any other medium of visual arts.

The association of printmaking with the notion of subversion has been due to these factors. For the emerging visual artists, printmaking could be a vital art medium, as it offers alternative venues of production and exposure for the artists operating outside the mainstream of the art establishment system.

Printmaking also claims the title of ‘democratic art’ as it is more accessible to a wider base of the society, and it may aid in blurring the distinctions between the ‘elite’ and ‘popular art’. Printmaking’s ability to navigate across various cultural boundaries qualifies it as an exciting venue of artistic experimentations for the contemporary artist.

In the visual arts domain of our societies, the printed image can be intimately incorporated with other media of visual arts. The technical range of printmaking makes it possible to both intervene with the photographic process as well as trace and record the human gesture. Printmakers can utilise their visual vocabulary to cross into other related visual arts territories such as mixed media, sculpture, and installation. As image-makers, printmakers are equipped with the knowledge and the technologies of design and print processes and are in a position to



interconnect printmaking art with other media of visual arts in ways that may not be open to visual artists of other media.

There is a need for a more self-conscious awareness of how printmaking functions across different levels of culture and informed choices to be made within that awareness.

Aesthetically, culturally and politically, printmaking comprises the potentials of new and innovative genres of artistic practice but also carries with it a conservatism that assumes largely unexamined practices and values.

The Regeneration of Printmaking

Numerous printmaking artists focus on a singular particular printing process, discovering inspiration in the voice of a solitary process. For other printmakers, process choices are guided by the concept of the artwork.

One of the primary qualities of printmaking is its adaptability and flexibility in correspondence to other media of visual arts. Printmaking artists keep on investigating the different prospects made by incorporating print media with other media of visual arts, which prompts the blurring of customary boundaries of the traditional printmaking art into different directions of the holistic practices of contemporary art. As a result of that incorporation a new term of hybrid-printmaking has emerged. The extended implication of the term hybrid-printmaking suggests departure to the notion of creative motivations to broaden the perspective on connections between materials, pictorial, and the uncertainties in creative practices. Contemporary printmaking can be considered as a method of accommodating the alleged confusions between visual, material, and theoretical concerns.

Along these lines, the physical aspect of a print is conceived beyond being a compartment for the visual, giving new settings of contemplating motivations in innovative procedures inside a wide array of artistic practices.

In the contemporary art scene, with the far-reaching acknowledgment of new printmaking terms, for example, mixed media print, print installation, and variable version print, numerous contemporary printmaking artists consolidate either different printmaking processes or printmaking media with non-printmaking media. This integration opens new doors of creativity that are more relevant to the contemporary art practice.

The division between the HOW of the procedure and the WHY of the idea in contemporary printmaking could be misleading as the inspiration can be altered, multifaceted, and even in some cases just subconsciously comprehended. Numerous thoughts add to an entire art philosophy that rises above any single or particular methodology. Consolidating distinctive print



processes or utilising print as an essential component of a more extensive mixed-media approach presents explicit difficulties and creates remarkable cross breed results that challenge the conventional notion of authenticity in printmaking.

There is a symbolic quality to the integration of printmaking and non-printmaking art media, where components of materials, pictures, and presentation integrate to form another classification of mixed media printmaking. The term mixed media printmaking is an exact assignment to these types of incorporation as it can portray artworks that consolidate diverse print and non-print processes, yet still can be defined as a genre of printmaking. The term is particularly accurate for visual arts that involve printmaking process as an essential component of the creation process yet evade old-style specialised characterisation of customary printmaking.

Mixed Media Printmaking

Mixed media within the visual arts realm refers to the integration of various media of visual arts, as a means of expression and exchange of visual properties. As various media of visual arts may interact both explicitly and implicitly, mixed media prints represent the combination of separate material vehicles to addresses the interrelations among media such as conjunction and concentration.

Mixed media prints can be defined as artworks that utilise printmaking in conjunction with other visual arts media in the process of creating two-dimensional artworks. The simplest extension of printmaking into the realm of mixed media is what is called “Enhanced Prints”, which indicate that the print has been manipulated by adding other non-print mark-making media such as drawing, painting and collage.

Other approaches to mixed media printmaking may include altering the surface of the print by staining, heating, or by coating it with different materials such as wax, varnish and silicone. These treatments of the print surface can change the predictable sense of the printing result and amplify the handmade aura of the final artwork. Manipulation of the print surface can produce a very unique artwork that cannot be defined within the traditional system of the classification of printmaking art.

Usually, mixed media prints capitalise on the contrast of voices that is associated with the conversation among the different two-dimensional media of the artwork.



Fig.1. Marina Provatidou-Street Life- Mixed Media Print (Etching, Collage, Photogravure, Burning) -30x40cm-2014

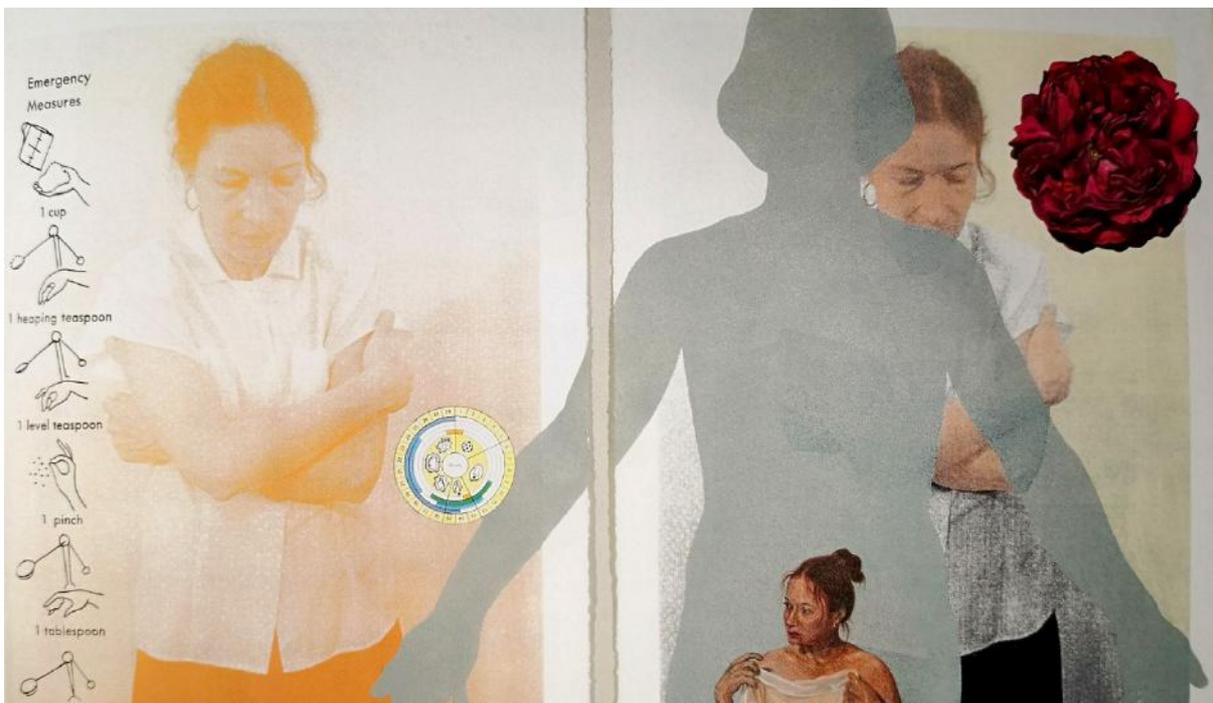


Fig. 2. Minna Rensick – Can't always be prepared- Mixed Media Print (Silkscreen, Solvent transfer, Coloured Pencil, Water colour, acrylic, colour photocopy)- 76x115cm - 1999.

Sculptural Printmaking

The notion of incorporating printmaking and sculpture has a historical background that goes back to the sixteenth century. Sculptural prints pervaded the European reading market of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Single sheets and book illustrations featured movable flaps and dials and functioned as kits to build three-dimensional scientific instruments. These hybrid constructions — part text, part image, and part sculpture — engaged readers; so did the polemical, satirical and, occasionally, erotic content. By manipulating dials and flaps, or building and using the instruments, viewers learned to think through images as well as words, interacting visually with desires, social critique and knowledge itself. (Schmidt 2017)

Similar to its adaptability in two-dimensional visual arts, printmaking can also be effectively utilised in three-dimensional sculptural artworks. Surfaces of the three-dimensional objects can be printed on with different printmaking processes, for example, silkscreen and stencil. In addition, three-dimensional objects can be built utilising printed materials such as paper, fabric, plastic, glass, wood, etc. That constructional approach of the printed materials may also be extended to the integration of the substrate materials. Within the sculptural context of the artwork, the printed materials are usually rearranged to construct a three-dimensional art object where other elements such as balance, texture and lighting play also a major role in final artwork.



Fig. 3. Lynne Allen, Moccasin 4, Sculptural Print (Intaglio, Shellac, Linen thread, Handmade paper), 22x10x6.3cm , 2000.



Fig. 4. Marilene Oliver, Radiant, Sculptural Print (Inkjet on Acrylic) , 48x71x99cm , 2006

Print Installation

Two-dimensional and three-dimensional print artworks may extend to the spatial realm as print-installation, in this case, the printed visual elements, and interact not only as objects but also as integral components of the interior or exterior space. When building the construction of the print installation, interrelations to other elements such as lighting, gravity, and the surrounding visual elements interact with the printed materials to form the final print-based installation.

Throughout the past four decades, numerous major contemporary visual artists have employed printmaking as a basis for print-installations, including artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Xu Bing, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Vito Acconci, Peter Halley, Kiki Smith, and Crystal Wagner.



Fig.5 Crystal Wagner- Pseudo Form I- Silkscreen Print Installation – 2018

Conclusion

Throughout its history, printmaking art has created ideological contradictions and a classification conundrum that cannot be reconciled with the prevailing value systems of visual arts. However more than any other discipline of visual arts, printmaking is argued to be brilliantly situated to give a space in which hybrid practices between thoughts, innovation, and technical procedures can emerge. Applying conceptual practices to the mixed media printmaking arena reveals ways in which material, visual and conceptual concerns can be reconciled by reformulating the artistic process. Situated within an understanding of conceptual art as a logic of specification, printmaking becomes a way to destabilise the conventional expectations about the certainty and singularity of driving ideas.

In contemporary printmaking practices, the search for the ambiguous term of authenticity seems to be irrelevant as contemporary printmaking can act as a bridge between boundaries of visual



arts and should be defined based on the originality of the content rather than rarity or technical classifications.

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