Centre/Periphery – The Predicament of Fine Art Printmaking

The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art is currently exhibiting 90 works by Terry Winters consisting of etchings, lithographs, as well as wood and linocuts. As with many exhibitions today there is a written text displayed at the entrance to the show giving a brief outline of the artist, his work and ideas. This text contains the following statement:

'Winters approaches painting, drawing and printmaking with equal regard, with no hierarchy that positions painting and drawing above prints.'

That the Met should host such an exhibition of printed works is undoubtedly a good thing for printmakers and printmaking. However the necessity to display such a statement is an acknowledgment of the pervasive viewpoint that printmaking is essentially inferior to painting.

To take another example, Edward Lucie-Smith’s extensive publication Art Today, which is an overview of the past 40 years of contemporary art, contains 536 full-colour images but has only three that are described as prints. Lucie-Smith clearly seeks to appear to be comprehensive and inclusive in this volume, for example he has chapters on gay and feminist art as well as racial minorities. He also goes to some pains to explain why he has not included more photography, however he makes no apology for the substantially smaller number of prints. Clearly he left printed works out because he did not consider this to be a serious omission. Perhaps it never occurred to him to include them. His book, as he puts it, 'accepts the current consensus as it stands'. It appears that the overwhelming perception is that printmaking is not the locus in which significant contemporary art is being made.
This situation seems particularly curious, since the printed image is one of the most pervasive phenomena of contemporary society, rivalled only by film and TV. I am referring here not only to advertising, magazines and 'popular' images. Much, if not most, of what we experience today of Art comes to us via the printed image: the art book, the catalogue, the poster and the post-card. The enigmatic situation exists whereby print exists largely to disseminate fine art images but not to partake in the creation of fine art to any significant degree. Why is this? Why should one visual form be given priority over another?

WHY IS PRINTMAKING MARGINALIZED?

It does not seem to be difficult to trace the origins of the assumption that a printed artwork is somehow intrinsically inferior. 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. Printmaking however was 'invented' and therefore carries the stigma of artificiality.

From its inception in the West printing was essentially anti-aristocratic and vernacular and therefore developed outside the aristocratic patronage, which enabled painting and sculpture to be the bulwark of Western culture. Even before the age of mechanical reproduction, the word 'print' was almost synonymous with 'copy'. The notion of a copy being inferior to an original can be traced back to Plato's notion of ideal forms.4 In the Medieval period woodblock images were often not only images copied from drawings or other sources but copied also from other wood blocks.5 In the 19th century, together with the professional engravers who produced transcriptions of the 'great paintings', many artists who made prints used them as a way of recycling their more successful images.6 So even before photography made mass art reproduction possible, printmaking was associated in the collective mind with derivation. The distinction between what the medium was used for and what it was, was apparently too subtle. The conclusion was that the medium itself was inferior rather than that the medium was being used for an inferior purpose. The struggle of etchers in nineteenth-century Britain to receive acknowledgment for their work as an art form is just one example of the art establishment's apparent inability to make this discernment.7
In their book, *An Introduction to Post-Colonialist Theory*, Childs and Williams make a general observation that 'the tendency of any discourse is ... to elicit forms of knowledge which conform to established paradigms, in a circuit of mutual reinforcement.'⁸ In this they identify the mechanism by which stereotypes are reinforced within society and culture. Applying this to the status of printmaking in the hierarchy of the arts, it may be concluded that the relationship of printing to painting is stereotypically predetermined. The self-perpetuating cycle of classification certainly cannot be underestimated. Because it is perceived to be a minor art, printmaking receives minor treatment by curators, galleries and critics thus effectively perpetuating its position as a less important art form. Major museums and galleries may exhibit prints, but usually in separate side rooms or in 'special' areas or exhibitions, not usually as, or in, 'Major' displays of important work. In the example of the exhibition at the Met cited above, it might be argued that contrary to the curator’s intentions this kind of statement helps to reinforce the very attitude it seeks to redress.

So it might seem that it is only a matter of re-education for printmaking to take its equal and rightful place beside painting. But is it really that simple? I contend that the art of printmaking, unlike painting (or photography for that matter), creates extreme ideological contradictions that cannot be easily assimilated into the prevailing art and culture value systems.

Much of what we assume to be self-evident about Art is in fact a received notion with traceable historical origins. The commonly held notion is that art is an autonomous sphere of human activity and the artist is an individual of special gifts acting as conduit for all that is finest in civilization.⁹ This idea originates with the growth of capitalism and gains much of its present character with the subsequent emergence of Romanticism in the late eighteen-century when Art became the defence against the dehumanisation of industry.¹⁰

In his book *Keywords* Raymond Williams observes that the word art in the eighteenth century meant skill, whereas by the 1920s it

‘increasingly designated a special domain of creativity, spontaneity, and purity, a realm of refined sensibility and expressive "genius". The "artist"
was set apart from, often against, society - whether "mass" or "bourgeois". The term *culture* followed a parallel course, coming to mean what was most elevated, sensitive, essential, and precious - most uncommon- in society.\(^{11}\)

Elsewhere Williams describes how the effects of industry and democracy gave rise to the uncoupling of culture from society, and high culture from culture as a whole way of life.\(^{12}\) Culture became a general category; Williams calls it a 'final court of appeal' against threats of vulgarity and levelling. It existed in essential opposition to perceived 'anarchy'. High culture became 'culture in opposition'.\(^{13}\)

Another writer on the subject, James Clifford, discusses how objects in society acquire or lose value. He expands on Williams' observations on how the definition of high art is determined in opposition to mass culture. Notions of authenticity, individuality, uniqueness, originality are set against their polar opposites - the 'Not Art' that is the common, the commercial, the reproduced, the utile.\(^{14}\) In order to be placed in the category of Art an object must be perceived to have certain characteristics. The idea of individuality and authenticity dominates as a mark of artistic worth, and in turn qualities such as spontaneity and directness are read as hallmarks of the authentic work.\(^{15}\)

The artist's print causes great difficulties in this definition of categories. While maintaining its right to be classed in the 'Art' bracket, it clearly exhibits characteristics of the non-art variety, for example, its multiplicity. Evidently the predilection of the bourgeoisie for the print has resulted in the art print being associated with mass culture. The fine art print is often hard to distinguish from its non-art cousins. Not to mention the confusion caused by publishers who market reproductions as 'Fine Art Prints' in limited editions. Printmakers have always had to negotiate this system of evaluation. One such compromise was the limited edition: the somewhat artificial restriction on numbers in order to produce an idea of preciousness and rarity.\(^{16}\)

But multiplicity or popularity are not the only qualities that might make the print suspect within this value system. To paint is perceived as a 'natural' process and the modern attitude is that the brush mark is the direct trace of the body and thus
an expression of the human essence to which it gives host.\textsuperscript{17} This attitude valorises any form of inscription directly linked to human agency and reviles the mediation of modern technology. Since it requires a technical process that comes between the artist's gesture and the finished object, the print is therefore suspect as a less than genuine art form.

This viewpoint has since found a relatively new variation in the notion that a highly crafted or skilled work is somehow less authentic than the work that is immediate and spontaneous. As Edward Lucie-Smith observes, 'more and more since the advent of Arte Povera, the well-made work finds itself accused of insincerity.'\textsuperscript{18} Self-consciousness, be it technical or otherwise, is seen as a kind of brake to the creative process.

Since the printmaking process by its very nature is a premeditated act requiring foresight and detailed planning, this kind of conscious and rational self-organization becomes the antithesis of the creative act. Is this perhaps why many painters who venture into print balk at engaging with the process themselves, preferring to have this part supplied to them in the form of a 'master printer'? This, of course, raises the problem of how much creative input the master printer contributes to the finished artwork. Therefore, printmaking has always had an uneasy and tentative relationship to the established art value system. However if it were fully accepted by the Centre it would in effect undermine the status quo.

In his famous essay of 1936, \textit{Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction}, Walter Benjamin claimed:

'\textit{To substitute a plurality of mechanically reproduced copies for the unique original must clearly destroy the very basis for the production of auratic works of art - that singularity in time and space on which they depend for their claim to authority and authenticity'}.'\textsuperscript{19}

Because this did not happen for fine art\textsuperscript{20} does not mean that the multiple printed work has lost its potential to do so. The fine art print in particular is inherently a threat to the prevailing system of 'art' evaluation. In order to maintain the system, printmaking must remain at the edge, divested of its strength.
But then what of the profound shifts in value that have been attempted by, in particular, conceptualist artists, in the latter half of the twentieth century? One of the things conceptual art attempted was the dismantling of the hierarchy of media according to which painting is assumed inherently superior to all others. It was an attempt to radically re-evaluate accepted notions of what art should be and in particular the overriding belief that art can only find true expression through the unique art object. It was a rejection of a market economy system of values which fetishizes rarity - that which permits the sense of absolute ownership.21

In contemporary art practice, it might be said that, in general, painting continues to prioritise the unique art object as the authentic repository of the imagination of the creative individual. Whereas sculpture has become the territory where such notions are challenged, where art is not in opposition to but seeks to engage with the wider semiotic environment. In the rest of this paper I will use the words painting and sculpture to designate these two attitudes.

One might have thought that printmakers would have shared in the ideological liberation that changed contemporary sculpture practice, opening up the medium to all the potentials that were inherently present. This does not seem to have happened to any great degree. Artists turned to photography and video as alternatives to painting. It has been observed that, 'a characteristic response of artists opposed to what they saw as the class character of "high" culture was to abandon those modes of artistic production historically most closely associated with it.'22 Printmaking, having attempted to accommodate itself to the value-system of painting for so long, now appears to be rooted in those values. And the position of printmakers, with their outlandishly archaic modes of production such as etching, woodblock or stone lithography, could be seen by many as hopelessly anachronistic, even more conservative than painting. Printmaking, it seems, is in a kind of no-man's-land, not quite able to gain full admittance to painting or sculpture and operating between high and low culture.
WHY BOTHER WITH PRINTMAKING?

All the above points may appear to be a very negative appraisal of printmaking and its relationship to fine art practice. However, it is not my intention in this paper to bemoan the plight of printmakers but to examine how an awareness of these issues might affect art practice. Are there advantages in not being at the centre? My own attitude coincides with that of the Australian artist Terry Smith, who when questioned on the experience of being an artist outside the geographical centre of art culture, responded:

'Marginalisation is a productive space, it's a space which you can use. You can fight back and also step away and step aside and you can construct other things as well'.

Can printmaking offer positive alternatives for artists if certain qualities are no longer seen as negatives, or as unwanted by-products of a lesser form of artistic expression, but rather as positive potentialities that point to new methods and means of artistic expression? How might a realization of these features be utilized to influence artistic practice and audience?

In assessing those qualities that are specific to printmaking the most obvious characteristic is its multiplicity. The process allows artists to make images that are original and authentic and yet exist in plenty. This quality alone makes it a very special province for the artist. Printmakers can access an audience/market more easily and can, to a certain extent, bypass the approval of critics, museums, art establishments: something usually required before painters or sculptors can find a market. Making prints is often a more viable way for the artist to sustain him/herself than either painting or sculpture, both of which are highly dependent on recognition and patronage by the art establishment. Current trends in art tend to emanate from the museum, whether sponsored by the state or a wealthy capitalist. In this environment the question might reasonably be asked, who has greater influence over what is seen? Whose purpose is served most, the artist, the audience or the curator/sponsor? The print, largely independent of the museum, arguably gives greater scope to the artist and the audience to choose and control.
Their mobility, plurality and affordability mean that as images, prints have a far greater viewing and distribution capacity. Historically the association of the print with subversion has been in no small way due to these factors. By comparison, a painting, unless it is reproduced or in a major museum - that is unless it has already gained recognition within the system - has a very small circle of reception. For the less-than-famous artist, printmaking is therefore more fruitful than painting. It offers very real ways for the artist outside the mainstream to operate.

Victor Burgin in his essay *The Absence of Presence* comments on an underlying motivation for change in sculpture practice in the seventies:

‘There is another history of art, however, a history of representations...For me, and some other erstwhile conceptualists, conceptual art opened on to that other history, a history that opens on to history’.24

He was advocating an art that was not an 'art in opposition', apart and above mass culture, but one that 'must speak (the) imaginary vernacular'. He was specifically referring to photography, but the printed image, the fine art print as well as the reproduction, is surely an inherent participant in that 'other history of representations'.25 Printmaking shares its traditions as well as its processes with the vernacular image. The history of the Victorian etching is an example of what began as a relatively obscure activity by enthusiastic printmakers and became a highly popular art. Prints still blur the distinctions between high and low art. This blurring is evident in the terminology used - the printer vs. the printmaker, the print vs. the fine art print, are subtle distinctions that many cannot make. That printmaking can traverse so many cultural boundaries should make it a very exciting field of operation for the contemporary artist. Instead, this association with mass production and mass culture is seen as a kind of contamination.

The visual dominates our society and mainly through the printed image intimately engaging with people's lives. Fine art printmakers can use the same language or modus operandi as advertising. As image-makers, they are equipped with a knowledge of the technologies of print processes, new and old, and are in a position to intersect with contemporary culture in ways not open to painters or
sculptors. The technical range of printmaking makes it possible to both intervene with the photographic process as well as trace and record the human gesture. It has, in other words, the scope of both painting and photography.

Again Burgin remarks:

'The artist first of all inherits a role handed down by a particular history, through particular institutions, and whether he or she chooses to work within or without the given history and institutions, for or against them, the relationship to them is inescapable.'

There is a need of a more self-conscious awareness of how printmaking functions within both high and low culture, and informed choices to be made within that awareness. There is a need to identify and articulate the particularities of printmaking if printmakers want to control their fate, rather than be victims to it.

Most printmaking students attend courses in the history of fine art, but that history is largely the history of painting. There is a need to inform on the particular history and tradition of prints and printmaking and recognize that it is a history that includes the vernacular image as well as the history of Fine Art. Burgin advises:

'We may refer to the vernacular in order to open the art institution on to the wider semiotic environment in which we live, to bring about a mutual interrogation of "art" and mass-media meanings and values.'

Rather than fit a practice Procrustean style to the value system of the centre, the objective should be to reassess and redefine the value system. As Raymond Williams stated in *Culture and Society*, 'the need (is) to unlearn the inherent dominative mode.' While printmakers continue to measure what they do by a value system that sees rarity and uniqueness as indispensable to creative worth, then they will continue to play a minor role.

Aesthetically, culturally, politically, fine art printmaking comprises the possibilities of new and innovative modes of artistic practice but also carries with it a conservatism that assumes largely unexamined practices and values. While the
practices of painting and sculpture have been widely theorized (some would argue too much so) the specific implications for printmaking are ignored. The social and cultural history and consumption of the fine art print has rarely been theoretically assessed and then only in the context of painting. I have touched on some of the arguments why printmaking needs a separate evaluation.

I shall end with a quotation from Victor Burgin's essay *The End of Art Theory*:

>'Seen from the centre of the discourse, the horizons of the discourse are quite simply the boundaries of art itself (as Wittgenstein said, "the limits of my language are the limits of my world"). From the horizon however, the view is of an other world. One, which includes elements of the previous one, but is no longer contained by them. From the centre, of course, this new position is literally eccentric; there are moments, however, when historical circumstances favour heretics, and when the "crazies" suddenly make sense.'

NOTES

3. Ibid. p.13.
4. cf. the introduction to William Desmond's *Art and the Absolute*, Albany: State University of Ny Press, 1986, for a discussion of Plato's and Aristotle's views on art as copy and art as creation.
10. Ibid. pp. 29-50.


13. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


17. Victor Burgin op. cit. p. 34.


20. It might be successfully argued that it has happened elsewhere in the arts, especially in music where recorded performances are a perfectly acceptable mode of appreciation.


22. Ibid. p. 5.


25. Ibid.

26. Ibid. p. 158.

27. Ibid p. 45.


Printmaking Techniques, History, Printmakers. The fine art of printmaking is concerned with the production of images by varying methods of replication onto paper, parchment, fabric or other supports. The resulting fine prints (impressions), while not ‘original’ in the sense of a fine art painting or drawing, are considered nevertheless to be works of art in their own right, even though they exist in multiples. It remains to be seen whether the latest fine printing techniques alter this assessment. Printmaking, which encompasses woodcuts, engraving, etching, mezzotint, aquatint, drypoint. The practice of printmaking as a fine art medium gained immense popularity with the establishment of Kala Bhavan founded by the Tagores in 1919. An earlier organization, also established by the Tagores, was the Bichitra Club - where new styles of painting and printmaking were explored. The three Tagore brothers, Abanindranath, Gagendranath and Samarendranath (nephews of Rabindranath Tagore), transformed the veranda of their Jorasanko residence into a meeting ground for the club and frequently hosted art salons there. Of the three brothers who spearheaded the Bichitra Club, artist Gagendranath. The Practice Area provides guidance and support throughout the stages of producing a printed image, from scanning to the final output. Digital facilities. Services and support provided. Application support for PhotoShop, FreeHand, QuarkXpress and Fontographer is available, but a rudimentary knowledge of programs is expected. The main areas of support: Calibrated digital colour output. Large inkjet prints up to 1.5m wide. Good hygiene in keeping the Printmaking APA well ordered and clean is expected at all times. Smoking, eating or drinking is not allowed in the Printmaking APA. About us. Accessibility statement.