

Imprint and the Residue of Exchange

“Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions”

Baldwin, James. *Everyone's Protest Novel, Notes from a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, reprinted in 1984) p. 19.

Introduction: On The Impossibility of Defining Print

Printmaking (as well as this essay, form following content) can and should be understood as an increasingly less limited set of parameters. Narrow and traditional definitions may speak to a certain kind of printing but fail to encompass the extended family so apparently visible to us at events like Southern Graphics Council and Mid-America Print Council. In a broad sense, this essay aims to clarify (or is to make more uncertain, instead?) those broad definitions into a working understanding of the contemporary practice in all its unpredictability, innovation, and many-faced iterations. Bold claims, I realize, but let's move through a few definitions to see if we boomerang, whirling into limbo, clutching at Baldwin's metaphorical straws.

The most traditional and perhaps the simplest understanding of printmaking, of what prints are, is represented well by William M. Ivins, Jr.'s text, “How Prints Look: Photographs with a Commentary”. As so many of us do, Ivins slides immediately into the idea that a print can be recognized via the process used to create it; this is the underlying assumption of his text.¹ We are introduced to the various graphic processes, the tools used in those processes, and the specific marks produced by those tools.² Ivins takes the generous view, for 1943, that the technical complexity or simplicity of a particular process is not the measure of its artistic merit, separating the prints into three “historic processes” or families: the planographic family (in which a smooth, hard surface is treated chemically to retain a pattern of ink through repeated transfers), the intaglio family (in which ink is rubbed into manually or chemically incised marks on the surface of a plate), and the relief family (in which differential height on the surface of a plate allows for the repetition of ink distribution).³ Ivins even goes as far as to assert these techniques may be deftly combined with one another to produce unique and beautiful effects; OK, Bill (may I call you Bill?), we're still with you. Bearing in mind the technological limitations of his time, one can excuse the omission of silkscreen processes.

¹ Ivins, Jr., William M. *How Prints Look: Photographs with a Commentary*. (Boston: Beacon Press, first printed 1958, reprinted in 1960), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

More troubling is Bill's understanding of the photographic and its relation to printmaking. Joyfully, he lays out the various ways photographs are used in the production of prints⁴ before arriving to a more specific discussion of facsimiles, succinctly defined⁵ as those objects reproduced in a manner apart from their original production. He guides the reader through all the necessary steps for distinguishing an original etching, engraving, drypoint, or woodblock line from its reproduction in photogravure. Present, but never explored, is the idea that a photogravure—never mind a photograph—is not a print so much as it reproduces a print. From our point of view today, this is an incorrect assumption. We know full well that photogravure (or photography) is an expressive medium unto itself. Why is it then that printmakers and the scholars who love to discuss prints are so quick to impose exclusionary definitions, like the kind that separate print from photograph?

Even more expansive definitions, like the idea of multiple originals, have their limitations. The multiple original speaks to the notion of the edition, the idea that each of the 25 impressions I took from a limestone this summer is as original as the last; after all the limestone itself is but a matrix from which an impression can be pulled. Similarly, all prints made from a photographic negative are each as original as the other, with the negative serving as matrix. Bill would point out that transfer processes like the monotype family (another category excluded from his taxonomy) contradicts the idea of multiple originals. We are therefore confronted by at least one roadblock to even that expansive and broad definition, but persevere we shall.

One of the best definitions I have encountered is Professor Bret Rothstein's (Indiana University Art History) notion of the exactly mechanically reproducible visual statement. Rothstein's definition is a modification of the concept of multiple originals to include his infamous example: the iPhone. The iPhone is a branded, easily recognizable visual statement. Through arduous and exploitative labor it is reproduced exactly. The iPhone displays a given image, be it the default background or a website or anything else, exactly as another identical model displays that image. By Rothstein's definition, the iPhone is a print displaying an infinite number of possible other prints (taken from my notes in *History of Printmaking*, taught by Rothstein in the spring of 2014). Therefore, it almost need not be said, prints have no inherent dependence on a particular substrate like paper, merely a history informed by that relationship. An astonishing subtext of Rothstein's definition made explicit is that manufacturing itself is a form of printmaking, that the industrial revolution is in effect the ever-expanding grip of printmaking on society. We are, like the frog in a gradually boiled pot, so utterly surrounded by prints as to render us numb to their presence.

Printing has always coexisted with, emerged from, and redefined commercial

⁴ Ivins, Jr. (1960) pp. 51-56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

reproduction; we printmakers have had to distinguish ourselves from those base aspects of mass culture that are too common to be considered fine art. Critics on the left and right in the time of William M Ivins, Jr. would agree on the stupefying effects of mass culture, its mundaneness and kitsch.⁶ It is this impulse to reject mass culture that makes Rothstein's assertion regarding the iPhone so radical. It requires us to reconfigure our understanding of what is possible and what is forbidden—what is outside the realm of our medium?

In retrospect, we celebrate the most beautiful, the most exceptional of these popular productions. We elevate the woodcuts of Posada, the lithographs of Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec—they are more than their milieu; they are special. We elevate *Fantastic Four #1*, in its original 1961 printing, not only because of the changes it brought to the medium of comics and to popular culture in this era of the Marvel Cinematic Universe blockbuster film, but also the original printing of the object itself. To comics collectors like me, there is a particular magic held in those hasty separations, that worn paper. We are seduced. We venerate, in hindsight, those aspects of mass culture that have stood the test of time, whose significance is clear to us now. It could be argued that we fetishize these objects. We imbue (imprint) them with meaning and significance beyond their original intention (or perhaps beyond their original cultural reception), giving them new life.

We printmakers borrow the modes and methods of commercial production, be they past or present, to form new kinds of expressive possibility. One need look no further than artists like Derek Besant⁷ or Mark Dion⁸ to understand that in certain contexts, the art world can agree that these artists are making prints and doing so using contemporary commercial processes. And yet, even then, we neglect non-object oriented art practice.

What of performance art and its reliance on print (in an expanded sense) to continually exist? The conceptual artists of the 1970s, the land artists, even the anarchic Dada artists to some extent used photography as a means of documenting and re-presenting their innovations. And if they did not, the scholars, curators, artists, and teachers who relayed their exploits to posterity certainly employed mechanically reproduced documentation. Are these documents, these representations, merely facsimiles as Bill would understand them, reproductions made apart from the original production method and therefore in some way lacking? Or do these representations allow us to take something of merit and value from the past (do they imprint on us)? And is it possible to

⁶ Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 192-196. Huyssen discusses the relation to mass culture at great length throughout the text, though that passage is particularly applicable concerning the agreement of Adorno on the left and Greenberg on the right.

⁷ <http://www.derekbasant.com/Derek%20Besant.html>)

⁸ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/mark-dion-2789>

consider that transfer, from performance or experience, to photograph or text, and back to us as a method of printing?

According to Professor Noel Anderson (head of printmaking at NYU), we can understand imprint as the exchange present between two or more entities. This essay is inspired in large part by Noel's performative lectures during the 2014-2015 MAPC and SGCI conferences. Noel described to us, through the example of the narrowness of available definitions for black masculinity, the limitation imposed on our cultural understanding of what black masculinity is, all the while relating it to the notion of imprint and the practice of printmaking. Imprint functions on us, giving us societally imposed notions, stereotypes of black masculinity that fail to describe reality—they do the opposite by asserting a simple definition that obstructs understanding and possibility. Imprint also functioned in those spaces to describe Noel as printing matrix and we the audience as substrate. We were imprinted, through his lecture, with new modes and understandings. However, even that falls short of an accurate description, for Noel demanded we talk back to him. We imprinted one another and Noel with our exchange, we transferred meaning between us; we all became matrix and substrate while learning about ideas and artists who both work within and transcend print, among other categories and participating in the same.

It is vital to state that this essay was written after conducting an interview with Noel by phone—it seemed appropriate to reach out given the extent to which his ideas have shaped my own regarding expanded practice and the imprint. Each part of this essay is contingent upon my discussion with Noel, implicitly or explicitly. Where possible and appropriate, I will note exact content, but consider this to be a blanket citation.⁹ We discussed, among many themes, the way that definitions can kill their subjects, both using the examples from his lectures and the rather Shakespearean example of the rose: would it not, by any other name, smell as sweet? And would you, when confronted by a rose, have any number of more descriptive modes to communicate what that rose was than the single word, "rose."

Simple definitions reduce ideas to symbols the way that icons reduce concepts to symbols. Another example might be the representation of love, easily conveyed through text on your iPhone using a heart emoticon and yet explored through the vastness of every human experience and culture in infinitely more apt and varied ways. It is the connection to black masculinity in Noel's introduction of the idea of imprint that made me feel so strongly about leading with that James Baldwin quote. One of the greatest writers of the 20th century, Baldwin as a person, a writer, and an essayist has done an incredible amount to break down narrow ideas regarding masculinity and blackness, numerous other topics, and our understanding of the social fabric as a whole. What follows is an attempt to understand and then utilize the imprint as a critical lens for

⁹ Anderson, Noel. Interview by author. Phone. New York, NY and Bloomington, IN, August 17th, 2016.

describing a new taxonomy of the print, one based on multivalent possibility rather than exclusion, an inversion of common ideas (stereotypes) surrounding printmaking as a medium tied to process and tradition.

Investigating the Definition of Imprint

Imprint: (noun **im**-print; verb **im-print**): any impression or effect (transferred in at least one direction from one entity to at least one other).

What does it mean to affirm experiences as “print and/or x” or “art and/or y” rather than deny them those multiple, intersecting classifications? What becomes possible when one is, as Noel describes, wary of linguistic codes and slippery with language? A certain non-specificity allows for a more open experience of something; even art can be too pointed a term for Noel on occasion (following the logic that as soon as something is labeled it is locked in, killed, robbed of its potential). Another way of describing this effect is by considering a label a signifier of the imprint we bring to an object / thing / experience / person / performance. The imprint, whether part of a shared cultural trait or something wholly personal, is carried within us. When we classify a subject, we imprint a set of characteristics onto it, ranging from what its function is, to what its place in the world is, to any number of other experiences we have.

Consider briefly commonplace reactions to various kinds of art. It is easy to imagine one overhearing a museum-goer remarking in skepticism or even disdain, “this [abstracted work] isn’t art; my kid could do this.” Implicit in this statement are many assumptions or limitations (of which these are but a few): 1 - Art cannot be made by kids, or at least not serious art. 2 - Art is something requiring a technical skill beyond what a child might have. 3 - Art must demonstrate itself to be art in an accessible, visual manner. 4 - The viewer does not recognize the value of this object, therefore it must not have value. The museum-visitor has effectively robbed the work of its potential to affect their experience, all with the imprint they brought with them. Or at the very least, they have delayed any awareness that they were affected.

On the flipside, consider the similarly easy remark regarding the Readymade, “well if this is art, I guess anything can be art.” What hopeful connotations this lament carries! Indeed, much of our perception (if not all of it) is contextual rather than absolute. Albers successfully proves to us that one color can appear as another depending on its context, history teaches us the same regarding comparative ideologies and political structures (what is progressive, conservative, radical etc. is entirely contextual; what is traditional even more evidently so). The less exclusionary one’s consideration of a subject, the more one can understand it in context. That context might mean its presence in an art space, a museum or gallery, including the exacting specifics of its placement (is it prominent or hidden, does its creator merit individual credit, what surrounds it?). Or perhaps it might mean its inclusion in a book or collection. Perhaps it could even mean the legitimization that comes from inclusion in a conference,

publication, etc. (like that which legitimizes this text). Meaning itself is subject to the imprint we bring to it... you're beginning to believe me, aren't you?

This is not some strictly pessimistic wallowing, in which the absence of restrictive definitions precludes meaning at all. To think in that way negates the reality of there simply being a whole lot of us carrying around various mixtures of shared and unique imprint regarding anything we "understand" or label. It is very difficult to deny your personal understanding of a rose as we both consider the rose. Noel used the phenomenological example of riding a train every day in New York as formative in his current understanding of "riding a train." Every time he encounters that phrase or concept, it is instantly compared to his experience, his connotative associations. Similarly, I imagine some combination of the Noel I remember having seen at conferences, representations of characters riding New York trains in various media (having never been to New York), and my own long experience riding the BART trains of the metropolitan Bay Area. While each of us draws from enough shared experience to communicate effectively, the more nuanced details are unique and personal.

Perhaps, through conscious effort and exchange, we can share a wholly new understanding, one that draws from and modifies each of our preconceptions. What happens when that chain of influence, of affect continues? Can it be multiplied through prints (books, works on paper, performances, deliberate actions)? Isn't there some radical possibility in the idea that we are responsible (at least to some degree) for the meaning we perceive? Does that break down barriers for you as it does for me?

And what happens when those barriers are broken down? I asked Noel whether the label of print or performance would be more apt, more functional to describe his lectures. His answer: both and neither. There is no point, necessarily, when the imprint becomes the single most apt critical lens through which to observe and understand phenomena. We run the risk of uselessness: if this definition does not supersede others, where does it fit? This discussion of imprint is not about replacing other definitions, it is instead about increasing our capacity to understand the multivalency of perception, experience, objects, phenomena, etc. It is a broader way to understand the taxonomy, the extended family of print itself.

Written by Raphael Cornford, August 2016.

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