



Philagrafika
www.philagrafika.org
info@philagrafika.org

Printmaking: A Colony of the Arts

by Luis Camnitzer

When I refer to colony, I mean it quite literally: as a territory taken over by another power, where identity is maimed and slowly forgotten, values are shifted and the will for independence becomes ritualized into an increasingly empty and hopeless vow.

When I arrived in New York in 1964 I shared a studio with a painter who would not miss any opportunity to let me know that he considered printmaking a minor and second-rate form of art-making. Although we were close friends, the comments managed to upset me. I seriously considered myself a printmaker and I didn't believe that there were major and minor forms of art-making. Educated in the Bauhaus spirit, fashionable in Uruguay during the fifties, I saw art as a seamless field. For me, therefore, there was art-making, period. I was essentially right and his reasoning was faulty—among other things for being a painting-imperialist. But deep beneath his needling, there was a point. I was using a technical discipline to define myself and this was conceptually wrong. Somehow I had forgotten that I was supposed to be searching for myself and to be using printmaking as one of the tools in that search. Instead I was limiting my own definition to and within printmaking. I lived the slogan: I make prints, therefore I am. And meanwhile, my friend was having a grand time exploring bad painting and chaos, breaking all the rules he could find. He had that kind of self-assurance that only is possible with metropolitan arrogance.

Since that time I have been groping with this aspect of my life and I frequently ask myself what a nice guy like me is doing involved with this messy set of techniques. I am still addicted to the aromatic melodies that emanate from solvents and inks; I consider the indelible stains around my nails to be cherished status symbols; I cringe with pain when somebody holds a sheet of paper without allowing it to find its catenary weight curve, and I believe that printers who don't clean the edges of their plates before printing are, eventually, duly punished in hell. This, of course, signifies my recognition of the beauty of craft, its soothing qualities and the occasional possibility of transmitting this sense of making to

somebody else as a form of insight. But it also means that I am trapped in that technical fundamentalism so typical of printmakers. A great mixture this—a colonial mentality laced with fundamentalism.

Printmaking is probably the best example of the conquest of technical fundamentalism over the creative freedom of art making. We have been imbued with so much dogma that we are unable to see the hypocrisy and the fuzzy and sometimes unwittingly funny reasoning we are subject to. One makes prints, however monoprints are controversial. So one makes many equal prints, but then hand coloring on the plate is permissible. Which means that the intention of making equal prints is what counts, regardless of the result. And then there should be many of them, but not too many. Also, it is preferable that the hand of the artist touch everything from preparation of the plates to the final signature. In fact, that touching ceremony is so important that, denying all preceding principles, if a printed sheet is hand colored and jumps out of the edition, it is worth much more than the rest of its interchangeable siblings. Which proves that there is a strong painting-envy operating in the market.

In spite of this, the market for the true original—the plate—is a minor one and, instead, all the 50, 100 or 500 prints are declared originals. This part I actually don't object to, since it probably represents the only aspect of the printmaker's essence which deserves respect. It may be the only pocket of resistance, the area and ideology from which independence can be fought for with some hope of success. This thought, now, also shows again how easily I regress into printmaking.

Continuing, however, with this possible essence, I have no problem with the economic and technical conditions that went into defining printmaking, since they bear some clarity. I have always been seduced by the theory that the print industry, as we know it, has evolved as a consequence of the big medieval Plague. According to that theory, the reduction in population led to a higher standard of living for the survivors, who therefore

were—suddenly and unexpectedly—able to afford the use of underwear. Consequently, a sizeable stock of rags was created which, recycled, in turn generated a paper industry, spurring larger quantities of prints, which led to higher printing speeds. Paradoxically and amazingly, the entire process, which was always about packaging and circulating information, landed in a path leading to “paper-less” printing, a world informed by compact disks and the Web. Even the notion of ownership has been challenged once Bill Gates shifted possession away from the actual works of art to the copyright, as he did in the case of Ansel Adams. Meanwhile, we printmakers use Rembrandt’s hardground and quibble about the percentage of rag content in hand-made paper. For whatever strange reason, we have chosen to stop our evolution in the seventeenth century.

The clear and focused wish to package and circulate information, added to a detachment from art, gave industrial printing its apparent freedom of action. The actual printing part has only been a temporary and eventually dispensable solution to the problems posed by the circulation of information. It was, nearly, a technical accident. Printmakers, however, seduced and attached to this accident while pursuing artistic ambitions, tend to work under the presumption that they have to print in order to produce art. Once they print, or know how to, the hope arises that something with artistic merit will automatically follow. Making prints is the task. Art seems to be a miraculous byproduct.

I think that this accounts for the fact that there are so few good printmakers’ prints. By good, I don’t mean technically stunning or visually stimulating. By good I mean prints that seriously affect the way we see things or the way we think about them. While in painting we may evaluate Rembrandt, Goya, Picasso, Matisse or Duchamp and many others as creators of visions, in printmaking we have trouble finding heroes. Most of the big names in painting also made prints. In fact, many of them helped define the history of printmaking—I picked the preceding names on purpose—but their imagery, or their approach to imaging, was generated from their other experience. Printmaking became the playground for inhabitants of other disciplines. Like going for sex tourism to Southeast Asia or for gambling to a Native American reservation, some revenues and maybe prestige are brought to the locals. The activities, however, don’t leave the visitors any more Asian or Native American than they were before leaving their original countries.

Among what we can call the “strong natives” we may find people like Seghers, Piranesi or Posada, and maybe some with dual citizenship like Dürer or Goya. Or we have odd characters like Rauschenberg, who did his best work while focusing on printmaking

problems—I am thinking of his reduction of a wood block and of the imprint of a tire of John Cage’s car—and later ruined it by using printmaking as a reproductive tool. In any case, not one of those we find in printmaking has as much of a household name as do famous painters.

If, to use a metaphor, we were to think globally instead of being hooked onto the idea of technical nation-states, this issue would be completely irrelevant. The primary mission of artists is to help organize signification with appropriate symbols and fight visual fatigue. Nobody should really care how the job is done, as long it is done well. But most of us do not think globally. When asked what we do, most of us wrongly answer with how we do it. I am a painter, I am a sculptor, I am a printmaker, fragmented by skills instead of purpose. In printmaking the pigeon-holing is exquisite and goes into precious detail: “I am an etcher, I am a lithographer,” etc. In Argentina the question, posed with a possible future boycott in mind, is similar to the allegiance to a soccer team: “Are you wood or metal?”

During my first visit to New York, back in 1962, I went to the then famous Pratt Graphic Arts Center. The director introduced me to the faculty teaching there, one by one, by describing their technique: this one prints on extra-thick hand-made paper with a self-made hydraulic press; that one engraves on plexiglass with a roto-tool; that other one burns into polyvinyl-chloride sheets; so-and-so does lithographic processes on zinc plates, etc. I left baffled. By then I hadn’t found out what those artists were actually doing, how their work looked or what they were about. I only knew how they did whatever they did. According to the introduction (and maybe that was the image they had of themselves) the purpose of their work seemed to be the technical breakthrough, which is strange in a world that doesn’t even remember who invented the paint brush.

However, at the same time, the institution was proud of having artists like Archipenko and Richard Lindner making lithographs in the studio. So it could be that there was an attempt at affirmation of identity through technical strength: those sculptors and painters needed the help of a printmaker technician to execute their work. Or there was the hope that their prestige would rub off, exemplifying another form of painting-envy. Whichever the case, the printmaker technician was limited to provide technical excellence. The aesthetic quality-control was referred to the painterly or sculptural imaging process, the ones that produce—in quotes—real art.

At the time I did not interpret this incident as being symptomatic of a colonial mentality. I rather saw it as a sign of holding a deformed image of an industrialized culture. It seemed that industrial production was used as a reference and standard for technology, in a manner

only possible in an affluent and developed economy. Practitioners of an old retrograde craft suddenly opened their eyes and what they saw forced them to give a priority to the updating of skills, without any time for anything else. They wanted to absorb industrial achievements into their technique, have “progress” aerate the mould marks out of the trade. It was not unlike what the minimalist artists underwent in the late 1960s, trying to abstract and capture the industrial look and finish in their aesthetic. Deep down, however, it was more like those so-called developing countries which, to catch up with the pace of the developed ones, try to quickly and artificially create heavy industries. It reminds me of Mao’s China, when each village tried to build a steel furnace and every villager melted perfectly usable tools to generate new steel as raw material.

This interpretation did not mean that I was oblivious to technical problems. Working in Uruguay I faced the task of printing etchings on a hundred-year old litho-press without felts. It didn’t mean either that technique would not affect the process of my creative work. Pondering about Picasso’s multi-color linoleum prints made from one ever-diminishing plate, I became interested in salami as the ultimate embodiment of edition-making. Each slice is a part of the edition, with enough randomness in the image to qualify as truly original rather than a product of reproduction, and with enough constancy to belong to a one and only sausage. And the act of editioning completely and forever obliterates the matrix. This thinking followed the visit to Pratt Graphics Center and some subsequent work there, and I would say that it belonged to my neo-fundamentalist period.

Today I am persuaded that the scene I encountered at the Pratt Graphics Center and which I would have encountered anywhere else, was primarily due to the colonial thinking of printmakers. The truly colonized doesn’t dare to think independently and, simultaneously, works only timidly within the master’s thought. In this case there were two master’s thoughts: the painter’s image and the industrial standard, and both were not promoted at all by printmakers, but by the masters themselves. Early in the 1960s Castelli had the gall of having some of his artists sign and number offset prints and to sell them for five and ten dollars. It was not clear if that was a challenge to traditional printmaking or, with the reduced price, a nod to real “fine printmaking” in quotes. Today, of course, the prices of those pseudo-proletarian collector items, signed by Warhol and Lichtenstein, surpass the quotes for any of our own distinguished specimens.

The technological push early in the 1960s was only a shy beginning. In the U.S. with Gemini, and Tyler as studios, and Alecto and Multiples as distributors, by the end of the decade the opening to techniques had become

rampant and, temporarily, quite fertile. A vague feeling of independence was in the air. There was a fleeting fusion of both a conceptual and a commercial clarity with three closely intermeshed consequences. First, the act of making a print became less important than the act of editioning it. Second, a new market was defined. With the increase in size and spectacularity making original art works inaccessible, the oxymoronic concept of “original reproduction” became the brilliant solution. Thus, thirdly, the “multiple” was born, extending the series of six bronze sculptures cast from the same mold, which until then had qualified as originals, to tens or hundreds of smaller and cheaper replicas. Both the words edition and market acquired new meaning.

With hindsight it is clear that this was not a technical opening by or for printmakers, but an application of industrial production to art. It wasn’t that the craft got enriched, it was that industry diversified its own output. Now, one of the big questions arising from this development is whether this concept of editioning constituted a form of democratization of art. Or, in the language we are talking here, was the colony being used effectively to achieve a form of globalization of the values of the empire? Well, the answer is yes in the sense that the lowering of the price of caviar makes it accessible to more people. Or more appropriately, that lowering stock prices may increase the base of shareholders. They are lead to think that they co-own the corporation, but their share in the decision-making really is kept rather slim. Clearly, the means of production continued to remain with those who originally owned those means. And, of course, the control of the image continued to be in the hands of painters and sculptors. But, continuing with the means of production, neither their ownership nor their control were passed along to the artists or were shared with them in order to truly achieve a fairer distribution of art. So, it cannot be said that contemporary printmaking, even in its extended notion of multiples, is part of a democratization process of the arts. In any place where prints could imaginably serve the purpose of a broad and economical access, it actually is much cheaper to produce a painting than a print.

The few examples of so-called fine art accessible to the masses by use of semi-industrial or industrial technology— after Daumier’s Carivari lithographs and Posada’s lead-cuts—both in rich and poor countries, were non-systematic and only connected with printmaking on the basis of their dissemination. To my mind come the Colombian Alvaro Barrios who convinced the publisher of a newspaper in Bogotá to reproduce his work full-page as part of a mega-edition during the 1970s, and pieces by Dan Graham and Joseph Kosuth which only lived in the smaller edition of the pages of Artforum in 1969. Unlike Daumier or Posada, neither of these artists intervened in the

process of making the print. The focus was on infinite distribution, not on craftsmanship. That quest for infinity, rather than the lack of craftsmanship, probably insured that not many of those pages were kept by collectors eager to increase the value of their assets. However, that quest for infinity came closer to some essential, maybe Kantian idea of the print. We thus reached one of the many fuzzy areas with which we are plagued in printmaking jargon: while print refers more to a form of dissemination of information than to the result of a craft, printmaking is only an action and the resulting object we call print then, is a proof of that action, but not really concerned with dissemination.

I recognize that in all of this I keep oscillating between wanting to remain within the craft of printmaking and opposing those who focus on the craft. There is a true love-hate relation here, stemming from a belief that only in this balanced contradictory approach one can use a craft correctly. Too much hate for the craft kills the work of art and too much love kills the artist. These mixed feelings may also have something to do with my own extra-artistic muddled politics: For example, I am opposed to nationalism, but I draw my sense of identity—not undogmatically—from the country in which I grew up and not the one I live in. The former being on the neo-colonial periphery, the latter making sure it remains there. The solutions for my own life should be simple: I should become a citizen here and I should become a painter. But I think there is more to my ambivalence, something like a fear to betray, even if the solidarity one wants to honor stands on flimsy foundations.

Printmakers' fundamentalism gives us a somewhat ill-placed sense of identity, one solely based on the physical geography of the kitchen in which we operate. This leads to the formation of a secret society of sorts. It is one which has its own directories, exchange of alchemies, separatist exhibits and private scale of values. As any other good set of colonial procedures, these tools serve both to assert an identity before it is totally lost, and as an act of self-defense. Satisfied with the fact that an acquatint was done without any visible undercutting, we feel released from the need to deal with the problems posed by the painter, sculptor, installationist or multimedia artist next door. We allow, however, the solutions found by them enter into our work.

The printmaker's fundamentalism puts us in a different and impoverished situation compared to other art-makers. No painter is fundamentally remembered for technical innovations. Primarily, a good painter is celebrated for the ability to appropriate an old medium to the point that it "seems" to have been inescapably invented for "that" particular image. When there is a deviation from the norm, like Pollock dripping all over or Tapes stretching walls on canvas, it is not the deviation

that makes it, but the occasional success in giving the sense of unique inevitability. It is that feeling that makes one of Morandi's dumb cross-hatching applied to his equally dumb bottles and pots, more memorable than all of Hayter's viscosity prints put together. Morandi created a credible perceptual continuum, Hayter celebrated and illustrated a technical trick.

Art history, as we study it, is characterized by products which arrived at a careful equilibrium between technique and vision. Printmaking was remiss in finding this balance focusing too heavily on technique and allowing, like most of crafts, to dictate the aesthetics by the way things are done. We are, today, about to cross over a new divide, one which will push not only the traditional ideologies governing printmaking even further into the past, but also art in general as we know it. With the onset of digital imaging; the arts, as we have been defining them, may become reduced to no more than esoteric crafts: folk-crafts among those without access to technology, hobby-crafts among those having the equipment available. Digital imaging, while coming with new technology, brings not so much of a technical change, but a mental change with it. In the more affluent segments of the population, individualization—if at all feasible—will rely on the manipulation of pure image, held on tightly tensed—and hopefully dust free—computer plasma screens of any conceivable size. With imagery unmediated and totally accurate, the margins given for appropriation, re-invention and individual technical breakthrough, will be practically gone. In the appreciation of its products, technique is to be taken for granted. The focus of the artist will have to be set on the pure creation of images and that is what the public will get, with more or less resolution, with a higher or lesser density of pixels per inch. Art will be the representation of pure vision or just pure vision—unhampered by the clumsiness of material crafts. The notion of originals and editions thus will lose any meaning, since dissemination is congenital to the work, it exists and is accessible on the net. Painting, sculpture and printmaking, if at all, will be taught in courses like Home-making II. Art departments will be abolished and the new Photoshop majors will graduate after four upgrades.

In other words, what I am saying is that our history of art will become obsolete and inappropriate. We will have to study it differently, maybe in the context of a universal history of fetishism. Meanwhile, a new history of art is being started for us. We don't notice because we keep our heads in the acid tray.

Acknowledgments

This article first appeared in the Text Archive of the Melton Prior Institute for Reportage Drawing. It is reproduced with permission from the author.

©Luis Camnitzer 2006