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The unstable print: material challenges in printmaking and the moving image

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ABSTRACT
The past few years have seen an emergence of printmakers motivated by moving-image technology to use print as performative creative practice; in film and animation, as installation and in various processes of thinking and production. Notions of movement and change that could be said to identify much of our contemporary world reflect the interests of a number of printmakers who utilize printmaking characteristics of multiplicity and reproduction by integrating the digital and the handmade within the moving-image. But what happens when printmaking that has entered the realm of multimedia technology returns to the physical, material print? This paper presents and discusses printmaking as moving image, and the practice of printmaking that utilizes the copy and multiplicity while exploiting qualities of change through, for example, organic non-archival materials. Drawing from the practices of three Australian printmakers, the paper asks: can the physical print convincingly perform, not only represent, movement and change through its materiality, and how is it to be valued within printmaking conventions concerned with longevity and permanence?

1. INTRODUCTION
In recent years a number of printmakers in Australia and internationally have turned to the moving image in their studio practice. Many have been motivated by moving-image technology to use print and drawing as performative creative practice; in film and animation, as installation and in various processes of thinking and production.

To define ourselves in media-specific terms of practice can be problematic; limiting and unrepresentative in 2016 and in fact at least since the past half-century. Yet it is precisely the practice of artists who have been immersed in the discipline of printmaking, whether in traditional or digital form, that I am interested in exploring: those artists who have been informed and have developed through, and have loved the very act of, printmaking yet who are compelled to interrogate it through new positions of practice.

The scope of print media that I relate to in this paper comprises methods and mediums that cross over/through various disciplines: Drawing, Animation, Print, Film, Video Projection. My focus is not so much on a multidisciplinary approach to making art, but on the conceptual and material approaches that draw from a range of sources and that are at the same time integral to printmaking.

To print, to imprint: to impress, to mark, to stamp, to engrave, to etch, to indent – all verbs implying fixity and permanence. The nature of print, its very definition and purpose, is to embed –

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2 Martha Buskirk notes that since postmodernism an artist could explore the qualities of a traditional medium, but “the selection of both medium and the qualities within that form will be seen as explicit choices rather than the reestablishment of previous givens.” Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art, MIT Press, 2003 p.123
to still an image. What, then, draws artists informed by printmaking, whatever the tradition, to experiment with displacing the stilled image inherent in the conventions of print?

2. PRINT AND THE MOVING IMAGE

I will discuss the moving image work of 3 studio practices: Martin King’s animated films, Antonia Aitken’s installations, and my own drawing that I term performative as differentiated from animated. The three of us have a history in printmaking and have come to use the moving image as a natural progression of our practice.

2.1 Martin King: Poetics of Motion

Martin King is an artist and Master Printer, based in Melbourne, who for over 30 years has had a consistent studio practice in printmaking and drawing. His current work in animation moves between and through drawing, printmaking, painting and installation. Drawing is the conceptual basis of his practice, whatever medium or technique he uses.¹

The first animation Martin King produced evolved from his work in Antarctica in 2006, *Flock*, extending his environmental investigations to an interest in birds and flight.² Though much of his work before this period took the form of themed series, in *Flock* and subsequent works he began to use sequential and relational formations in grids or sections. In 2007, on a 2-week artist’s residency in Broken Hill, Martin began developing narrative video explorations of the landscape that he reinterpreted as drawings.

![Martin King Slowly disappearing darling 2007](https://vimeo.com/36876312)

*Slowly disappearing darling* 2007 was his first stop motion animation. Since then he has developed three more animations. The technique is straightforward, inspired by William Kentridge’s ventures into animated drawings. Martin stresses that he is not drawn to use advanced animation software programs to create his imagery; the materiality of drawing is important to him. There is meaning for him in the handmade both conceptually and experientially: ‘My work is as much about the act and the physical drawing as an environmental message’. His 3-minute stop motion animation *melencolia* comprises 600 individual still drawings.

The mass of individual drawings directs a sense of authenticity towards the presence of the subject due to the tactile presence of the drawing itself, and the presence of the artist through the direct evidence of his mark. The physicality of the black charcoal in the drawings is replicaded in the prints with their qualities of line and richness of ink in silhouette forms. To use animation software would risk the removal of what he terms as ‘the clunkiness of the hand-drawn’.³ The commitment to each drawing as singular and unique contributes to the perception of a living, breathing subject.

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¹ Interview with Martin King, 17 May 2015
³ Interview with Martin King, 17 May 2015
2.2 Antonia Aitken: Dialogue of Place

Martin King’s animated work opens up possibilities beyond representation of movement, to a poetics of movement (ie of life) in the natural world. Like Martin, Antonia Aitken’s interest is in the natural environment, and her use of moving image explores concepts of place and time. While Martin does not privilege one medium over another in his practice, Antonia at the time of my writing is at a crossroads, questioning the conceptual integrity of her practice within the boundaries or even potential of printmaking, and moreover, the two-dimensional image.

Marks on a surface are significant to Antonia’s work not only as representational imagery, but as traces of action or presence. Marks are capable of carrying and conveying meaning by recording traces of place and body, like the environments she has interpreted that bear witness to the significant impact of land exploration and exploitation by settler societies.⁶

In works produced from an artist’s residency in the mining town of Queenstown in 2013, Antonia explored shifts in meaning between the hand-produced mark and its digital translation in direct relationship to each other. One of these works, Confluence, is a multimedia installation that positions video in dialogue with the physical object. The video was shot at the confluence of the Queen and King Rivers, the place where the two rivers become one. According to Antonia, the Queen River is a murky, yellow sludge, laden with copper tailings from the Mt Lyell mine. It enters the King River and in so doing pollutes it to the extent that the King River is considered one of the most polluted rivers in Australia.⁷

![Antonia Aitken Confluence: Queen and King Rivers, 2014](image)

In Confluence the video is projected onto the gallery wall and reflects over a number of her used copper etching plates placed as a reflective platform. Antonia describes the action in self-reflexive terms as ‘a contemplation on my growing awareness of the environmental impact of particular materials that I use in my work’. She describes how the work physically engaged the viewer when exhibited in 2014:

> I found people mesmerized by the work for some time, staring into the copper plates as the watery video slid over the surface. As the audience got closer to the work the video was also projected onto their backs and heads creating another element of physical engagement, whereby the audience became another surface for the images and ideas to be projected.⁸

Antonia’s description reveals the particularity of the printmaker’s vision. The plates become both evidence of their physical properties and evidence of their capacity to store memory as marks,

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⁶ Antonia Aitken correspondence to Gali Weiss, 30 April 2015.
⁷ Ibid
⁸ Ibid
while the projection is seen as another surface of marks that in turn are transferred to other surfaces.

2.3 Gali Weiss: Temporality

My own interest in imagery that moves started well before my animated work. Before venturing into technologies of moving-image, my work took the form of multiples and series, and as installations and progressions in the artist’s book.

I related to fluid aspects of drawing and print as possibilities and variations; changes within images occurred as a result of my subjective response to the image rather than a descriptive approach to observed or imagined form. My interest in print was as copy and the variations inherent in hand-produced copy, particularly in the context of representations of subjectivity and shifting identity. I experimented with unconventional methods such as face imprints and related to the paper surface as membrane, and marks as fissures and stains, with interest in organic trajectories and ephemeral qualities.

My current moving image work has its foundations in 1999 with a series of portraits of my father, employing the photocopy/solvent transfer overlayed with repeated applications of charcoal drawing, each layer drawn at a different sitting. The photograph copy first layer was a stilled representation at tension with the fluid one created by the numerous gestural drawings, resulting in a unified yet not clearly identifiable subject. Over a decade after these portraits, I returned to that work, revisiting the past representation of Aaron but experimenting with recreating the representation as a process, in a moving-image, using simple animation techniques based on incremental changes of frame by frame.

The two fixed images used in the current work are copies: the photocopied transfer of an original photograph, and a photographed image of the now unified drawing. Between the two still positions is a process of drawing or movement – facilitated through Photoshop cloning – that evolves from marks sourced from the original (end-result) drawing but gestured independently in transitions that relate movement. The process of performative drawing through re-created gestures simultaneously creates new marks and trajectories while revealing marks of past ones.

3. THE RETURN TO OBJECT

3.1 From immateriality to materiality: the return

The three moving-image practices outlined in this paper, return to the object in some way. Martin King has produced etchings and photogravure sequences of his animated footage, creating another level of reproduction that takes on new individuality. These works are stilled
representations of movement, but in their exhibited sequentiality ask real-time movement of the viewer. Antonia Atkin, as mentioned previously, incorporates the physical object in dialogue with the projected and continues to explore embodied modes of practice evoking environmental concerns. My own return is an experimental one that incorporates all the past materials of my practice but with different intentionality.

In my 'return' from my animated moving-image work to the physical object of print, I am drawn to return not only to the haptic processes and qualities of making, but also to new intentions with materials of old. Like Martin, I am recreating stills from my moving-image footage, but as images that will chemically change in real time and place. By merging archivally sound materials and methods such as photogravure etching with non-archival ones such as photocopy transfer and organic materials, my work proposes an experiment whereby the images produced will 'move' in time through their deterioration and change.

While I can visualize the outcome imaginatively as the disappearance of certain parts of the image, my experimentation lies in the in-between process of slow change in the gesture and overall aesthetic of the imagery at various stages of the print’s life, and thereby in its meaning. The work suggests the narrative of process as a progressive representation rather than retrospectivity of representation.

To use organic or non-archival materials in art is not a new innovation, and the use of ephemeral non-art materials contemporary in art practice has been an artistic and conservation consideration for over half a century. However, it seems an uncommon practice within the area of printmaking. My experience is that printmakers in general place particular value on the archival qualities of their materials, whether in keeping with the traditions of their practice or in digital technology.

Concerns regarding longevity and permanence of artworks are prevalent in art museums, and conservation is becoming ‘a more participatory practice that is shaped by new technologies and new currents in contemporary culture.’ Conservation departments address ethical and practical considerations for conserving collections of non-permanent media or re-enacting ephemeral works for exhibitions. Such works have contributed to rethinking the role of Museum as keeper of objects for posterity. Practices and structures have been created to deal with these new materials, in an approach of participation and collaboration, taking into account artists’ intent and often their instructions.

**CONCLUSION**

What is particular to printmaking is fundamentally its nature of fixing a mark. When that is displaced, the purpose of print is questioned. Paradoxes of permanency and change are highlighted in printmaking approaches that investigate moving imagery and material that at once performs, interrogates and relates to legacies of the discipline. These approaches are particularly pertinent within cultural problematics of ephemerality of knowledge, history and futurity. When arts practice breaks away from the boundaries of discipline, materiality can enter a conceptual field in a way that may not be possible within the traditions and inherited craft of a practice. By presenting moving-image artwork within an expanded role of printmaking, this paper explores contemporary printmaking as a site and possible platform for interdisciplinary practice, bringing together sources and approaches from different practices concerned with materiality and embodiment in the making of marks that inscribe as well as erase, and that perform.

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9 Dieter Roth and Joseph Beuys, in the 1960s onwards, each famously experimented with organic materials in their artworks.
11 Ibid pp163-179
12 International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NCCA) [http://www.incca.org](http://www.incca.org); the Variable Media Network [http://www.variablemedia.net](http://www.variablemedia.net); The Artist Documentation Program [http://adp.meriit.org](http://adp.meriit.org); All retrieved 28/05/15
13 Interdisciplinary rather than multidisciplinary in the sense of a synthesis of knowledge and approaches from different disciplines.
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