



Prints, or Contemporary Art?

José Roca

First of all, I must acknowledge publicly that I don't like prints.

I don't like video either. Nor do I like photography, drawings, sculpture, or ceramics, for that matter; Let alone folk art, or film. The thing is, I am not interested in a particular medium as a distinct field. I am interested in art, regardless of the medium. Media are means that are often mistaken for ends in themselves, and this is especially true, I must say, in the realm of print. Printmaking is a tool, a powerful one, and only by acknowledging that its intrinsic qualities make it useful to say something that cannot be said equally well in other media, can it be reclaimed from technique-as-content and be understood as content *through* technique.

In his text, *Printmaking: A Colony of the Arts*, Uruguayan artist and curator Luis Camnitzer, founder in the late sixties of the legendary New York Print Workshop, declared: "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."

Camnitzer is referring to the entrenchment of many printmakers within the intricacies of their craft and the specifics of technique, instead of letting the print processes be the mere means with which to achieve their conceptual goals. And he adds:

"(...) 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 by 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 automati-

cally follow. Making prints is the task. Art seems to be a miraculous by-product."

These provocative remarks by an avowed printmaker bring to the fore an important subject: How to break down the frontiers that define so narrowly the territory when it comes to printmaking? How to reclaim printmaking as a means and not as a goal in itself? And, more importantly, how to make visible the various forms of print that are at the core of contemporary artistic practice?

The ontology of the graphic act is to leave an imprint on a support, one that can be reproduced at will. The print ethos implies generosity through multiplication, accessibility and collaboration, and presupposes a desire to disseminate knowledge in order to reach a wider audience. All these attributes that come natural to print seem to be major preoccupations today across the board of artistic practice, and not just in the field of what can be conventionally termed "printmaking".

Our task as curators of *The Graphic Unconscious*, the core show of Philagrafika 2010, was to bring to the fore the graphic component in contemporary artistic practice. Or rather, to identify ways in which the graphic act manifests itself in a meaningful way in current artistic production. This is what was at stake in Philagrafika 2010. And, for the sake of consistency, we considered a print anything that had three components: a matrix, a transfer medium, and a receiving surface. It can be plate, ink and paper; it can also be a digital file, laser-cut vinyl, and the walls and floors of the exhibition space. Or a silkscreen, charcoal dust, and water. The matrix stores the necessary information to reproduce; the medium transfers the information, and the support receives it. All kinds of contingencies can alter the outcome of the process, and often enrich the results. Prints that were exhibited in Philagrafika 2010 spanned from woodcut to video and the whole range in between.

But if I am not interested in print, why make it the core of an international triennial of contemporary art?

I will backtrack a little. Let me acknowledge publicly that I like print. I think it is “front and center” in contemporary art, and is poised to be in this decade what photography was to the eighties. As Judith Hecker, curator of Prints at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, has remarked, “Installation, performance, and video art, photography, and new-media technology (including digitization, virtual reality, and the internet) have expanded artistic vocabularies, and artists are increasingly drawn back to the printed series because it enables further exploration into the multiple, developmental, and spatial structures of these other mediums.” Printmaking is the new drawing!

I will make the case for medium specificity. The German city of Munster started its *Sculpture Project* thirty years ago, and at that time a medium-based event appeared as something rather strange. In its four incarnations (it is an event that happens every ten years since 1977), it has successfully addressed the issue of public art from very different perspectives, ranging from the tradition of object-based sculpture that inserts itself permanently in the city, to temporary and even performance-based works that address the issue of the role of public sculpture today. This *medium specificity*, which has been redefined in every version of the *Sculpture Project*, is what has made this event distinct from other biennials and triennials. And it has brought Munster, a small city with relatively few contemporary art institutions, considerable recognition in the art field at large, to which attests the more than half a million visitors it received in 2007. The same can be said about The Drawing Center in New York, founded in 1977, and which, during Ann Philbin’s tenure was turned into a vibrant exhibition space that helped usher drawing as a central player in the realm of contemporary art. The catchphrase “pushing the boundaries” seems a little rhetorical, and so does “expanding the field”; and none explain exactly what is at stake, because sometimes it is not a question of breaking down the confines of the medium, but rather working on the preventions of the critics and the public regarding what they perceive as a fixed category or secondary form of art-making, and bring them in.

Philadelphia has its own distinguished case of a medium-driven endeavor that has gained international recognition: the Fabric Workshop and Museum. The FWM, which also started in 1977, is not worried too much about the definitions of what they do, whether it is “fabric” or “silkscreen” or something else, and has established a worldwide reputation while doing away with conventional truths and even reasonable expectations about the medium. This is because they understood early on that even if sometimes

the visitor wonders “how is this a print?” or “how does this relate to fabric?” these are meaningful questions that make people reflect about art in a wider sense.

Philadelphia is perfectly suited for a large event, and it makes sense that it is related to printmaking. The city itself was the key witness to revolutionary social, economic, and political shifts that helped to define America as a nation, in which the printed word and image played a significant role. No other medium or theme would be more appropriate for an art endeavor in this city.

Medium specificity acts here as an alibi that allows us to commit the crime. Or, to steer away from a physical metaphor and go into a psychological one, it acts as a self-imposed straightjacket, which forces us to think of creative ways to open it up. It’s in this liberating effort that the curatorial role resides. If there is a “graphic unconscious” in contemporary art, our task as curators is to bring it to the surface of public consciousness, to reclaim a space for the *return of the repressed* (imprint) lurking inside contemporary artistic practice.

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