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## Authenticity in Printmaking – A Red Herring?

I would like to start by saying something about the title of my paper, as not everyone in the audience may be familiar with the British expression of something being 'a red herring'. This expression is generally used in the context of a conversation that goes off on a tangent, a distraction from the thrust of the main argument. What I'm asking is whether the concern with authenticity in printmaking is appropriate.

Authenticity in printmaking is set out in the guidelines and parameters which define what can be considered an 'original print', in terms of the processes used and the rules governing editions and presentation. Kathryn Reeves in her paper at the last *Impact* conference hinted at this when she spoke of 'the fanatical concentration on media ... in virtually every printmaking history'.<sup>1</sup> This central concern, even obsession, with the media and craft of printmaking still constitutes a large part of the self-definition of printmaking, as a glance at any up-to-date printmaking journal proves. In my opinion the concern with this particular kind of authenticity, necessary as it is, must not cancel out discussion of the intersecting of technique and meaning in the concept of authenticity. Today's literature in the field shows a growing awareness of the debate on authenticity. The title of this conference, *Material and Meaning*, is further evidence of this trend.

How do we define authenticity? What is the problem with authenticity? The dictionary definition of 'authentic' is 'genuine, authoritative: true; of established credibility;' and also 'not spurious: real: pure'.<sup>2</sup> What is immediately apparent is that it is defined in contrast to its opposite, the spurious, false or inauthentic, with the first term carrying all the positive, including moral connotations. The term is also affiliated with presence, uniqueness, originality. Adding authorship to this list we recognise the now familiar cluster of concepts which have been the major focus of theoretical discussion and artistic practice since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

If we step outside the art context for a moment, it is blatantly obvious that the authentic is frantically pursued in almost all areas of life. But authenticity in life is spurious (the dictionary definition of 'spurious' is 'false', in other words 'inauthentic'). It now encompasses the 'inauthentic' in form of the mass-produced, the non-unique and un-original which, in a curious twist, prompts the frantic search of the authentic in the first place. (We can all think of endless examples such as the 'authentic' scent of grass out of a spray can and so on.) With the subsuming of every aspect of life under the commodity system, we now live in what Baudrillard has termed a state of 'hyperreality'. He claims 'that all of contemporary life has been dismantled and reproduced in scrupulous facsimile.'<sup>4</sup>

Art was for a long time and is still regarded as the one enclave which preserves authenticity. But now authenticity is seen as a crucial ideological component of the self-definition of art as an institution. The result is that, historically, its ambiguity in both theory and artistic practice has been repressed.

According to Benjamin, authenticity and its attendant categories became 'undone', not abolished, as a result of the reproduction of art which he mainly discussed in terms of photography and especially film. However, recent writers have highlighted the fact that the whole binary concept of authenticity versus inauthenticity (the single, original, hand-made versus the technically produced multiple and so on) has a much longer history. The French art historian Georges Didi-Hubermann in his groundbreaking work on the 'imprint'/'cast' traces it back to the Renaissance.<sup>5</sup> And Rosalind Krauss has eloquently demonstrated the suppression of repetition as counterproductive to the ideology of originality, authenticity and so forth in early modernism.<sup>6</sup>

The resultant re-definition of authenticity is no longer in terms of a dichotomy between the real, unique and the false, but is rather seen as embracing both. The traditional opposition between the 'hand made' in art, as evidence of authorial presence guaranteeing the commodity value of the product, and the reproductive, indicative of technology, is therefore thrown into jeopardy.

Where does all this leave us with regard to printmaking? Historically, we are all too aware that the conventional definition of authenticity has relegated printmaking practice to a marginal position. The repercussions are still felt despite the popularity of printmaking as an artistic mode of expression within a modernist conception of media in the 20th century. This is despite all efforts, for example, the concept of the 'limited edition', or the destruction of the plate, to establish mechanisms to safeguard the notion of uniqueness and authenticity.<sup>7</sup>

There is no way around the crucial fact that for any edition *one print is as authentic or inauthentic as the other*. Each print is authentic in the sense that it derives from the same 'original', and each print is inauthentic in the sense that there are multiple copies - however much they may vary. Hence none is a unique original. As early as 1977 etching has been referred to as the 'simulacrum of originality', namely 'a mass-produced expression of uniqueness'.<sup>8</sup> One can easily apply this to all of printmaking. Prints have always carried with them the instability of authenticity and the implicit critique of affiliated concepts which we only now have come to acknowledge. As art historian Benjamin Buchloh has argued:

'The technically reproduced work of art critiques the auratic original which glorifies the unique act of creation.'<sup>9</sup>

The scintillating double nature of the print (one is reminded of the wave/particle aspect in quantum physics) and the questions it raises have been described by Georges Didi-Hubermann. His remarks relate to the imprint or cast but can be applied, in my opinion, as well to the concept of print:

'I think that the imprint is the "dialectical image", ... something that as well as indicating *touch* (the foot which impresses itself into the sand) also indicates the *loss* (the absence of the foot in its imprint); something which shows us both the touch of the loss as well as the loss of the touch.'<sup>[my translation]</sup><sup>10</sup>

To the traditional markers of authenticity in painting and drawing, which it has emulated,<sup>11</sup> printmaking has added its own: the craftsmanship located in the particular intensity and quality of the etched line, the velvety depth of its darkness,

the contrasts between light and dark; the luminosity and intensity of colour in lithography.

Many of the techniques we use in printmaking now *simulate* processes which formerly were associated with a particular craft or handmade process: hence the authentic! But surely simulation has been part and parcel of printmaking all along if we think of its emulation of painterly techniques?

Numerous contemporary artists such as the Americans Kiki Smith and Sarah Charlesworth, and in Britain the yBas (young British artists), use the tension inherent in printmaking to comment on wider cultural concerns such as technology, the media, and the status of the body and self.<sup>12</sup> The work I wish to discuss in more detail is my own and that of my fellow German artist Friedhard Kiekeben who as with me is based in Scotland. Both of us address the tensions inherent in printmaking by delving a little deeper into the historically inherited fabric of the techniques, practices and associated meaning of print. Following Marcel Mauss, Didi-Huberman speaks of 'technique' in terms of 'a tension between its material and symbolic efficacy'.<sup>13</sup>

Repetition and seriality are procedures adopted by both of us. Our work also draws on the 'faktura'. 'Faktura' is the term art historian Benjamin Buchloh uses to differentiate the traditional 'facture' with all its connotations of the artist's authorial style and generator of authenticity from the trace or mark since Manet. In contrast to the facture, the faktura takes on the quality of the mechanical, emphasizing the mark's materiality.<sup>14</sup>

I now turn to the work of Friedhard Kiekeben. *Line Reflection* of 1988 (see Fig.1) is an installation and consists of 12 etchings and 12 etched zinc plates, measuring 3.0m x 1.30m x 3.0m. The prints on the wall are matched by their respective plates on the floor below them. The most striking feature of the work, the presence of plate and print together, performs an 'outing' of that big taboo, the hidden generative principle of the print, the plate. It is a taboo because, as I said earlier, the presence of the plate confirms the suspicion that forms the invisible subtext of every printed image: that its roots are elsewhere, that it is the product of another, hence not original, unique and so on. Presence and absence, original and copy,

similarity and difference are laid open but not resolved. In fact, they cannot be resolved because they are constitutive elements of the matrix. The concept of the 'matrix' as the womb - its literal Latin meaning - is where another is formed. This term has lately become popular, especially in printmaking. The gender aspect of the term ('matrix' is also linked to 'mother') is especially relevant in the light of printmaking's marginal status as masculine high art's 'feminine' 'other'.<sup>15</sup> That the matrix with its potential for reproduction was hidden for so long (or even destroyed, as we know) is therefore not surprising as it is the visible evidence of authenticity's dreaded 'other', the source, the space of the multiple or the copy.

The other issue *Line Reflection* addresses is the fetishisation of the craft which characterises much of the ethos of printmaking, especially of its older practices such as etching which Kiekeben uses here. Speaking of a 'fetishisation' of the craft indicates - in Freudian terms - the obsessive covering up of a repressed lack, the lack here being the lurking of the reproductive principle of the matrix-mother. In *Line Reflection* it becomes doubly uncovered:

The seemingly expressionist, abstract marks are de-coupled from the etcher's own hand as they are generated purely through the process of the materials employed; hence, one could speak of an 'automatic' production. ('Automatic' refers here to a machine-like, technical activity rather than the psychic 'automatism' the Surrealists favoured.) By shifting the mark making process from facture to factura in this manner one conventional hallmark of authenticity is here foregone.

This work also, almost didactically, conjugates light and darkness from evenly muted grey to brilliant white and darkest black. In traditional printmaking the tonal mastery is the yardstick of the craft, the artistry of the maker, whereas here it is a mere alphabet of physical properties, another by-product of the process.

Kiekeben's work at the Royal College in 1991-93 continues the critical examination of 'material and meaning' via the matrix. The matrix now more obviously is understood in the double sense of material support and informational code. Instead of marks referencing - albeit at one remove - classical abstraction, as in the

previous work, there now reigns the generative principle of computer generated code. Indeed these marks were created on the computer, but as we know, the computer can simulate the expressive (if one thinks of all the different paint effect options) as well as generate the non-expressive. Kiekeben's drawing here self-consciously opts for the non-expressive, more specifically for what we recognise as signs of the digital age: at first through what looks like variations on the all familiar bar code, later forms which themselves are the visual traces of the infinitely multiplying computer code as we know it from reproductions of highly magnified computer chips. Here the idea of the matrix is doubled: from a structural principle through the coupling of plate and print in the earlier work onto the level of the image.

The other striking feature of this work is the combination of plate and print in a permanent object. As the title, *Fusion*, of the first objects produced in this manner indicates, the plates are 'fused' with images printed from them. The word '*Fusion*' suggests an irreversible process of a coming-together of different materials. The usual division and tension between the plate and its product, form and image, is not only called into question as with the previous work but overcome, resolved. By doubling or trebling the plates and the prints from them any simple attribution of origin (and originality), 'good' and 'bad', of which comes first, which second, as well as authenticity, is impossible. The concept of the edition in a traditional sense is abolished. Instead, attention is directed to the properties of the different materials: the weight of the plate, the lightness of the paper counterbalance each other. Moreover, it is not always clearly evident which is which, as, for example, *Insert Two in Three Nr I-IV* (1994) (see Fig. 2), confounds the viewer's expectations as to which is plate and which is paper. This is done by combining two slightly differently coloured plates with prints in grey tones. The association of grey with the metal coloured plate and colour with the print is here playfully reversed.

Through the process of folding the actual plates are made useless for further etching. Unlike the destruction of the plate for the purpose of (artificially) limiting the edition, here the result is a unique single authentic object. Nevertheless this object or rather these objects call into question any simple notion of authenticity or modernist mastery through their image as well as through their serial nature. They also comply with what Umberto Eco has called "'variability" as a formal principle.'<sup>16</sup>

In the context of this paper, particularly striking is Kiekeben's work from 1995, *Blind* (approx. measurements: 3m height x 30cm width) (see Fig. 3). It consists of free-hanging rectangular aluminium plates, a blank plate alternating with a screenprinted one on both sides. Obviously one can only ever see one side and hence the tension which the work sets up, the conundrum of every plate I have spoken of earlier, is doubled. There is a further aspect to this work which is highly relevant to my discussion. The printed plates themselves are - contrary to appearances - not etched but screenprinted. In the context of Kiekeben's other - etched - work which uses a similar visual language, this referencing of the linear codes of etching is therefore a mere simulation. In the age of the computer, this simulation can be read as general allusion to the coded and repetitive nature of visual representation. It also playfully calls into question any essentialising definition of the codes of printmaking. It defies any attempts or tradition which might insist on the particularities of the medium in order to attach authorial mastery to a particular form of expression, or to invest it with the presence of an unambiguous authenticity.

Like Kiekeben's, my own work also engages in a questioning of printmaking and a conventionally understood authenticity by referencing the expressive mark and adopting a strategy of serialisation and 'variability' of both image and object. Unlike Kiekeben, whose questioning of the authorial mark ensues by divesting it of its expressiveness, my own work for the past three years (carried out in the medium of screenprinting), attempts a similar questioning by means of repetition of the same mark or ensemble of marks.

The screenprint has been defined in terms of 'imprint'.<sup>17</sup> This seems valid as there is no left-right reversal as with the other traditional print media. Instead, there exists a direct equivalence between matrix and form. Therefore the screenprint can be considered the most indexical print form unlike the other print techniques which always contain their own dissimilarity, their own opposition in the form of the plate. The screenprint nevertheless shares in the latter's ambiguities or what Didi-Hubermann calls the 'deception', the 'fiction', the 'exchangeability' of the imprint.<sup>18</sup> The notion of exchangeability seems particularly appropriate in relation to screenprinting because of its 'gift for precise and endless repetition'.<sup>19</sup>

Let me now turn to my own work: its formal base consists of a single set of pencil marks taken from an earlier print which could be categorised in stylistic terms as 'lyrical abstraction', employing expressive marks and vibrant colour with landscape references. This single set of arbitrary marks or 'figure' (I understand 'figure' here as referring to an abstract ensemble of marks) has been processed through a whole gamut of repetitions by varying:

- placement, number, spacing and scale of the figure
- colour applications
- left-right reversal of figure
- negative-positive reversal of figure
- double printing and overprinting
- grouping.

The first series of works carried out in this manner is *Positive-Negative I, II, III* from 1999 (six prints, each measuring 75 x 105cm). *Positive-Negative I* creates a serial structure by repeating the 'figure' at close intervals and doubling it as a mirror image. *Positive-Negative II* and *III* continue the repetition further through overprinting (see Fig. 4). More than just a reference to printmaking's reproductive nature, repetition functions here to expose the 'unease' of the imprint. If Kiekeben 'outs' the plate, so my working procedure 'outs' screenprinting's twin nature of similarity and exchangeability, of authenticity and non-authenticity which it shares with the imprint.

The drawn mark references the traditional language of the print and, moreover, signifies the most authentic, spontaneous and 'direct' artistic expression, the 'facture'.<sup>20</sup> But repetition turns the drawn mark here into a 'ready-made', a sign, a simulation of expressiveness. Facture turns into faktura. Simulation is called into play at another level: the choice of colour, or rather, the non-colour of black and white and grey, connotes the colour and light-dark contrast of the earlier print techniques. The title *Positive-Negative* and the procedure of reversal from left to right also signal or 'quote' characteristics of the older processes. But the work as whole also constitutes a playful nod in the direction of the conventional idea of authenticity and uniqueness. It is impossible to make a totally exact copy of the

work despite, or rather because, of its multiple repetitions. For each copy the density of the ink, the application of the figure will vary - independently of any 'authorial' involvement.

*Prototype Series*, 2001 (see Figs 5 & 6). The make-up of the screenprint in terms of matrices of different sizes, of different origins and visual characteristics, allows it to be considered *in terms of montage*. Initially, the montage character may have applied more to lithography and screenprinting than to the other print techniques, although this has changed with the incorporation of other methods such as photomechanical processes and the trend now to use several print techniques such as photo-etching, lithography, screenprinting etc. in one print.

Following Rauschenberg (and early Dada-photomontage) much of printmaking maintains this montage character by mixing like with unlike and, in Rosalind Krauss's words, manifesting the 'spacing', the gaps of its process, thereby rejecting the traditional unity of composition.<sup>21</sup> Other work - by, for example, Sam Francis, Howard Hodgkin - negates the underlying montage character in favour of a simulation of organic unity approach.

The *Prototype Series* follows neither. It uses the repetition of the same figure as indicative of the montage character of the screenprint. Through different types of repetition, for example, left-right reversal or mirror image, an all-over pattern of 'figures of the figure', varying in size and configuration, is created. The serial nature of the *Prototype Series* continues the demonstration of the generative principle of the matrix and suggests the exhilaration of variability to infinity. Here, as in the previous works, close overprinting of the figure/pattern results in the appearance of a three-dimensional, almost 'photographic' effect which is contradicted by the flatness of the figure/pattern and the technique itself. This allusion to different visual codes, the code of the drawn mark, and of the photographic, is another instance of the hybrid, impure nature of the medium of print.

## CONCLUSION

What I hope to have shown is that the search for an unambiguous authenticity is invalid. If not quite a red herring, then certainly a pink one. Benjamin does not seem to have recognized, according to Didi-Hubermann, that the element of touch beyond reproduction is a guarantor of uniqueness, of authenticity and power of the aura. Not that the reproduction per se destroys the aura, but the 'loss of touch in a repetition without matrix - and without the process of the imprint' does.<sup>22</sup>

With ever increasing 'invisible' technology all around us, as well as in printmaking itself, the particular involvement of human and machine in printmaking retains this element of touch. This may not be always evidenced in the make-up of the final product but it nevertheless forms its symbolic matrix. As Didi-Huberman says: 'Technology does not - does not *just* - mean "progress" and "novelty": it points in all temporal directions.'<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

1. Kathryn Reeves, *The Revision of Printmaking*, Paper at Impact Conference 1999, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, see website: <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/amd/cfpr/impact.htm>
2. Macdonald, A. M., *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh, revised edition 1977).
3. See, for example, Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era from the late 60s to the early 90s* (New York 1996); Connor, Steven *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford 1997, 2nd ed.); Forster, Hal, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass. & London 1996).
4. Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford 1997, 2nd ed.), p. 56.
5. 'The question, whether to reproduce an object serially, means to destroy its aura, its authenticity, goes [therefore] at least back to Vasari, who willy-nilly passed over the role of reproductive technologies in the creation of an authentic "modern" sculpture.' [my translation] Didi-Hubermann, Georges, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung, Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks* (Köln 1999), pp. 12/13.

6. Krauss, R., *The originality of the avant garde and other modernist myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985) p. 162.
7. Walter Koschatzky lists any number of misuses of these mechanisms, see 'Original und Reproduktion' in: Walter Koschatzky, *Die Kunst der Graphik, Technik, Geschichte, Meisterwerke* (München 1975), pp. 27-45. Printmaking magazines equally warn against the subversion of established practices. See the article by Rudolf Broulin, 'Quo vadis printed art?', in *Grapheion*, Nr. 10, 2/1999, pp. 54-55.
8. Beat Wyss quoted by Rene Hirner in his 'From the woodcut to the internet' in: *Grapheion* 2/1998, Part I, pp. 45-51 (page 48).
9. Benjamin Buchloh quoted in: Römer, Stefan, *Künstlerische Strategien des Fake, Kritik von Original und Fälschung* (Köln 2001), p. 53.
10. Didi-Huberman, op. cit. p. 10.
11. Two examples may suffice: Rene Hirner in his article 'From the woodcut to the internet' writes about etching: The new technique - in contrast to the copper plate - could 'reproduce the individual script of an artist.... It emphasized the specifically artistic element of individual drawing style.' And on mezzo- and aquatint: 'Mezzotint facilitated the printing of whole surfaces in one or several different tones, so that painterly effects could be achieved.' Hirner, op. cit.
12. See Susan Tallmann, *The contemporary print: from Pre-Pop to Postmodernism* (London, 1996), chapter 8.
13. Didi-Huberman, op. cit. p. 16.
14. Benjamin Buchloh 'From Faktura to Factography', in *October*, Nr 30, Fall 84, p. 87, Footnote 6; see also Römer, similarly 'The original is always positioned in analogy to the artist's manual work, the trademark of his artistic genius.' Römer, op. cit. p 110.
15. See K. Reeves' paper at last Impact conference, op. cit.; see also article in *Grapheion*, 2/98, pp. 4-8 by Claude Sinte 'Reflection on the construction of a graphic language' which refers to 'engraving'; for general currency see Guiliana Carbi's report in *Grapheion* Nr 13, 1/2000, pp. 48-49 on an exhibition with the title *Matrix* in 1999, a show of 'multiplied art' as part of a project run since

1995 in Trieste, Italy, with the title *Contemporary Trieste - A Dialogue with the Art of Central and Eastern Europe*, devoted to contemporary art. See also Kiekeben's own comments 'Beyond the Physical - Art and Matrix', published after the presentation of my paper, on the *In print* website: [www.in-print.org.uk](http://www.in-print.org.uk)

16. In his essay of 1985, 'Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics', discussing the serial nature of TV and films, Umberto Eco makes the point that the enjoyment of serials is not due to the *difference* of one from the others in the series but that it is due to their *sameness*. What the viewer enjoys is in Eco's words the 'strategy of variations'. Eco, U., 'Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics', in Capozzi, R. (ed), *Reading Eco, An Anthology* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997), p. 25. Although Eco comes to his views by analysing TV serials, I think his findings can be fruitfully applied to Kiekeben's work: '... what is of interest is not so much the single variations as "variability" as a formal principle, the fact that one can make variations to infinity. Variability to infinity has all the characteristics of repetition, and very little of innovation. But it is the "infinity" of the process that gives a new sense to the device of variation.' Ibid. p. 29.
17. Hirner speaks of the screenprint as an 'imprint' (see Hirner, op. cit.) without further explaining this choice of term, whereas Koschatzky talks of 'Durchdruck', literally a 'through-print' (Koschatzky, op. cit. p. 195). The German 'Durchdruck' could be translated as 'imprint' but suggests a different movement, a stronger connotation of activity which is lost in the somehow 'passive', more 'feminine' 'imprint'.
18. Didi-Huberman, op. cit. p. 42.
19. Susan Tallmann, op. cit. p. 210.
20. As an aside, it is interesting, if not surprising, to note that the spontaneity of drawing so prized in the modernist context, has been proven to be 'extremely calculated'. S. Römer referring to Rosalind Krauss, see Römer, op. cit. footnote 60.
21. Krauss, op. cit. pp. 103-5.
22. Didi-Huberman, op. cit. pp. 43-44.

23. Ibid, p. 15.