

# Introduction

What purpose is there, one might ask, in a collection of texts on the meaning and status of print – in printed form – when we supposedly live in a ‘post-print’ culture, in which an immense number of sources are available at the click of a mouse? Moreover, what reason is there in dedicating a whole book to one – albeit greatly varied – discipline when art today is largely ‘post-disciplinary’; when the majority of artists adopt a variety of media and processes rather than following the modernist ethos of disciplinary purity?

An early impetus for this anthology lay in the difficulty I encountered in finding Ruth Weisberg’s frequently referenced essay of 1986.<sup>1</sup> The availability of rapid, digitally delivered interlibrary loans may have changed this situation; however, not everybody has access to an academic library. Also, not *all* texts are available at the click of a mouse. Writing on prints and printmaking has been, and often still is, published in geographically dispersed and not widely disseminated conference proceedings, biennale or exhibition catalogues, journals or specialist publications.

My intention with this project, therefore, is to provide a critical ‘topography’, a map of some of the debates on contemporary prints and printmaking since the 1980s – albeit a necessarily partial map.

*Perspectives on contemporary printmaking* is the first anthology of its kind. It therefore presents a unique resource. Although it is inevitably shaped by the editor’s familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon context, it is not – unlike biennale and conference publications – bound by specific institutional or national agendas. Its framing of issues is based on a rigorous examination of the field.

It is important to stress that the anthology does not deliver a general survey for the simple reason that several such publications already exist.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, countless publications are available in the form of catalogues of international print biennales and major exhibitions – for example, the landmark shows by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York – and increasingly conference proceedings, such as *IMPACT*.<sup>3</sup> These tend to

be focused on a single and often topical, premise or theme. This anthology, by contrast, uses a four-part thematic structure – with further keywords in Parts III and IV – to highlight issues and questions as to the history, ontology, discourse and institutional–material ‘fields’ of printmaking practice as they have existed or have emerged over the course of the last thirty years.

Why this special publication when the subject has been and continues to be a solid, even if somewhat marginal, branch of art history?<sup>4</sup> Debates on contemporary prints are not new either. Just consider the large body of writing by art historians and art critics on – typically well-established – contemporary artists who make prints.<sup>5</sup> Artists themselves have spoken or written about their engagement with print for centuries. However, Weisberg’s essay of 1986 can be taken to mark an increasing self-consciousness and broadening of the discourse among artist-printmakers themselves.<sup>6</sup> In particular, hers is a prominent example of an extended critical engagement by a print artist with the broader, philosophical and cultural framework of their own practice rather than mere attention to matters of style, motif or technique. The roots for this heightened critical engagement lie in the burgeoning and often heated cultural debates from the 1960s onwards. Echoes of this theoretical impact, for example of semiotics, can be found in the writings of authors such as Weisberg and others in this anthology. The chosen texts are informed by the critical debates of the last decades – on class, race, gender, aesthetics and ethics, the social mandate of art, new technologies, globalisation, etc. – even if not explicitly addressed in each contribution. In recent years, the increasing emphasis on research in art, not just in the academic context, and the changing self-definition of artists – who are as much writers, speakers, curators as well as the makers of their work – have furthered critical engagement with print from within the field itself.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of examples of this development represented in the book.

Also, during the period covered in this book, the number of print-specialist, research-focused symposia and conferences at art institutions but also at print workshops worldwide, has multiplied.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, within the larger art context, recognition and critical appreciation of prints or printmaking still occur only marginally, if at all. As Canadian artist and printmaker Barbara Balfour (2016) has noted:

When objects as diverse as the Shroud of Turin or Andy Warhol’s ‘paintings’ are not discussed, expressly, in terms of their printed qualities, I long for clarification to be made – not to claim their inclusion in some definitive list of printed works or for the sake of bringing them into the print fold, but to acknowledge that part of what makes certain work interesting is connected to its printed nature. ... these situations make me want to call out, ‘but it’s a print!’ (146–7)<sup>9</sup>

The marginal status of prints and printmaking is a phenomenon to which a number of texts in the anthology refer.<sup>10</sup> It continues to exist despite

the fact that prints have been and are a crucial feature of many contemporary artists' multi-media practice. Increasingly, however, printmaking's 'ex-centricity' and its outsider status are regarded as a vantage point rather than a disadvantage.<sup>11</sup>

The new hegemony of the digital in culture at large has simultaneously fuelled interest in 'slow' media and processes, of which the older techniques of printmaking are considered to be one prominent example. The association of older processes with slowness is somewhat ironic, given that digital processes can be extremely protracted and time-consuming. Anyone who has undertaken digital image editing or 3D printing knows how painstakingly drawn-out they can be. Nevertheless, the identification of older processes as being 'slow' sticks. In Part I the re-emergence of the woodcut is cited as one such example. The crisis that was felt within the field of printmaking due to the appearance, during the 1990s, of digital technologies, especially imaging software and home printers, led often to either absurdly enthusiastic or despairing reactions in equal measure. These have now been superseded by a cautiously optimistic mood as to the future of printmaking, partly for the reasons mentioned, and also because digital technologies have been incorporated into or are complemented by – rather than having simply replaced – older technologies.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, if not surprisingly, print and its history is gaining critical and theoretical attention in the context of the study of new media and new media art. The brief historical overviews at the beginning of the collection by Ernst Rebel and Beat Wyss are both written from the perspective of a history of new media.<sup>13</sup> As the text by French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman (1997) on the notion of the imprint in Part III argues, a more complex understanding of history and temporality permits us to look into the past to discover the present and future alike and vice versa.

Several factors give prints and printmaking prominence today – over and above its specific manifestations – despite frequent proclamations of print's demise in culture at large:

- Self-publishing is gaining in importance and is widely practised in contemporary art;<sup>14</sup>
- contemporary art's emphasis on sociality, collaboration, ethics and political action can be argued to have been vital features of print practice for centuries;<sup>15</sup>
- the recognition of the importance of materiality, craft and manual touch, as currently theorised, for example, in craft and art theory, has given new credence to a physically demanding and – in some respects – technically 'outdated' discipline such as printmaking;<sup>16</sup>
- the inherently mechanical nature of print makes its practitioners exceptionally well-prepared to engage with and incorporate, as well as contest, new technologies;

- the recognition that no medium is stable or ‘fixed’ and should instead be regarded as ‘multiple’ and heterogeneous has gained currency;<sup>17</sup>
- the notion of an ‘expanded print practice’ or ‘print media’ as a collective term are indicators of this widening of the concept and practices of print that align it with contemporary multi-media art.

These factors, even if not explicitly addressed in the individual texts within the book, are referenced in the extensive further reading lists at the end of each of the four parts.

It is important to say what you will not find in this book: there are no technical discussions as such or texts dedicated to single print techniques. The reason for the omission is two-fold. There are countless publications, websites, blogs etc. dedicated to specific print techniques. Moreover, as several authors in this volume argue, printmaking is often primarily framed – by writers and makers alike – in terms of technology and techniques. I wanted to avoid the same overemphasis – a collusion with the ‘techno-fetish’ of printmakers, as it has been memorably called by Graeme Cornwell in 1992 and critiqued, more recently, by Luis Camnitzer (2011).<sup>18</sup> I do believe that the material aspects of a medium or media are vitally important. Indeed, as Ewa Lajer-Burchardt and Isabelle Graw (2016) have argued, ‘the material and technical register of the work of art’ must be regarded as ‘the very site rather than the mere support of meaning’ (8). Hence a number of texts pay close attention to the making and/or physical and technical make-up of prints. However, I hope that the various contributions in the anthology show that technology and technique are never purely ‘technical’, or mere ‘tools’, and that they are always mediated by multiple factors – economic, social, scientific, philosophical, cultural, aesthetic, personal – no matter how ‘immediate’ or pragmatically motivated they appear to an individual practitioner or indeed, an institution.

Also not included are critical texts on individual artists by art historians or critics, although such work is often of a high quality and proposes broader insights into the field. Instead, I have aimed to include a variety of voices and authors with different professional identities and affiliations. There are contributions by art historians, curators, critics, but equally by artists themselves. In addition to this authorial diversity I have also opted for different textual formats or modes of writing, from longer, in-depth academic discussions (by, for example, art historian Didi-Huberman, philosopher K. E. Gover, curator Susan Lambert) to writing that combines theory and practice (Barbara Balfour, Richard Harding, Clare Humphries, the former *Printeresting* team Amze Emmons, R. L. Tillman, Jason Urban). New modes of ‘art writing’ that elide the theoretical and the poetic are also included (Nicky Coutts, Yara Flores). This is to account for the fact that the conventional hierarchies between Theory with a capital T and theory with a

small t, between academic and creative, specialist and amateur knowledge, are being re-drawn. Moreover, alternative modes of writing pay attention to their own texture and sensuous materiality and hence correspond more closely to the art itself than conventional models of writing.

### **The structure of the book**

The texts are grouped into four themed sections or parts, each preceded by an introduction which gives a brief outline of the texts and their relevance. 'Part I: Genealogy' provides a brief contextualisation of print's broader history. It also includes an examination of its current functions in society at large. 'Part II: Debates' is chronologically organised. This is to give an indication of the different emphases of the debate about printmaking over the period of time covered in the anthology. The texts collected here – mostly written by artists – show both continuities and differences in the conception, positioning, concerns and practices of printmaking. 'Part III: Keywords' pinpoints some of the key concepts associated with prints and printmaking. 'Part IV: The field' identifies a range of printmaking's institutional and geographical locations, modes of production and examples of dissemination.

Inevitably, the topography that the anthology provides is far from comprehensive and not intended as a definitive recent history. Printmaking is now a truly global field with innumerable strands or force-fields. Many of these are well connected; however, it is important to bear in mind others that remain off the map. South African Dominic Thorburn's (unpublished) presentation at *IMPACT* 2011, titled 'Navigating the North–South Axis – Divide and Rule?' examined some of the geo-political imbalances that prevail in global print practices and exchanges.

The anthology should therefore be approached in a spirit of orienteering, prompting additional investigation and study, both practical and theoretical. Readers are encouraged to create their own map, or temporal and thematic trajectory through the material presented in this volume, and find the connections between different texts that are pertinent to them. By referring to the further reading lists at the end of each section, readers are then able to create a diverse, yet interconnected web of multiple intersecting lines that lead beyond the book itself.

Note: Some desirable texts were not available due to copyright restrictions or astronomical fees. These have, however, been included in the further reading lists. Overall, preference has been given to texts that may not be easily available but, as explained above, in some cases accessible texts have been included because they contribute to the discursive field that the anthology aims to create.

## Notes

- 1 Weisberg's 'The Syntax of the Print: In Search of an Aesthetic Context' was published in 1986 in the legendary journal of the Tamarind Institute, *The Tamarind Papers*. Its influence prompted the conveners of the 2005 *IMPACT* Conference in Berlin-Posznan to invite Weisberg as a keynote speaker to revisit her earlier paper after almost twenty years.
- 2 The best-known in English are Tallman (1996), Miles and Saunders (2006) and Coldwell (2008).
- 3 *IMPACT* stands for 'International Multi-disciplinary Printmaking, Artists, Concepts and Techniques'. See the information on the website of the Centre for Fine Print Research (CFPR) at the University of the West of England, Bristol: [www.uwe.ac.uk/sca/research/cfpr/dissemination/conferences/impact.html](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/sca/research/cfpr/dissemination/conferences/impact.html) [Accessed 15 February 2017].
- 4 In addition to general art historical journals, specialist journals such as *Print Quarterly* or *Nouvelles de l'Estampe* approach prints and printmaking from a largely art historical perspective. As of 2015, a welcome forum for print specialists has emerged in the form of the Association of Print Scholars (APS). APS is focused on 'innovative and interdisciplinary methodological approaches to the history of printmaking' and aims to 'facilitate dialogue and community among its members and promotes the dissemination of their ideas and scholarship'. This is a fantastic initiative that welcomes both art historians and practitioners alike and is international in its remit. For an insightful assessment of the historiography of the study of prints, see APS's inaugural lecture by Peter Parshall, 'Why Study Prints Now?', 25 September 2015. A revised version of the lecture can be found in the September/October issue 2016 of *Art in Print*.
- 5 Susan Tallman's (2012) review of four landmark shows at MOMA, New York, gives an indication of the expanding discourse since the 1960s, through the lens of this important institution.
- 6 This is not to deny the important role of earlier figures, such as James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) or Stanley W. Hayter (1901–88), and many others for a self-understanding of modern printmaking in the West.
- 7 For one example of such research within the academic context, see Amanda Thomson in this anthology, as well as references in the further reading list of Part IV.
- 8 The following few, largely European, examples give a small indication. They have occurred in addition to larger events associated with biennales and conferences such as the bi-annual *IMPACT* with changing locations world-wide or the annual *SGC International* in the US: The *FIRST EDITION* Print Symposium was hosted by Cork Printmakers print studio in Cork, Ireland, in June 2017; *RE:Print/RE:Present* was a one-day symposium and exhibition at Anglia Ruskin University Gallery, Cambridge, curated by Veronique Chance and Mark Graver in 2015; *Printmaking in the Expanded Field*, a three-day symposium organised by Jan Stefan Pettersson at the Oslo Academy of Art and Design, also occurred in 2015. The 2010 *Printopolis* symposium by Toronto's Open Print Studio yielded the eponymously titled publication, edited by Jenn Law and Tara Cooper (2016). The *SNAP* International Print Symposium at Kloster

Bentlage in Northern Germany is the only such event in Germany (2009, 2012, 2015).

On the changing identity of artists, see Singerman (1999).

Paul van der Lem (1999) considered the difference between artistic research (or 'search') and academic arts-based research in his presentation for the first *IMPACT* Conference, in Bristol in 1999.

- 9 See also Jenn Law's essay 'Notes from the margins of the empire' in the same publication, and Pelzer-Montada (2008).
- 10 See Weisberg, Roca, Reeves, Harding in this anthology. See also Parshall (2016) for an art-historical perspective.
- 11 Tallman (2013). Sarah Suzuki considered different print constituencies in her 2011 essay 'Print people'.
- 12 Printmaking even appears to have obtained the much-sought-after label of being 'cool' – at least in some quarters. See R. L. Tillman's (2010) wry blog 'On the faddishness of printmaking'.
- 13 See also Cubitt (2014). Precursors to a consideration of print in the context of media are, of course, William Ivins and Marshall McLuhan. A fascinating project is the digitisation and online publication of the Graphical Collection of the Göttweig Abbey, Austria. It is realised by the Department of Image Science of the Danube University Krems and aims to further research into the monastery's vast and significant historical print collection in the context of image science and new media art. [www.gssg.at/gssg/displayProject.do](http://www.gssg.at/gssg/displayProject.do) [Accessed 16 January 2017]. See the essay by media theorist Oliver Grau (2014).
- 14 See Johanna Drucker's essay in Part IV.
- 15 See, for example, Marion Crawford (2016). See also the keyword 'Collaboration' in the further reading list in Part IV.
- 16 On the former, see Adamson (2013); on the latter, Buszek (2011). Further impulses for challenging and stimulating reconsiderations of materiality can be found in the field of material studies and the emerging field of 'new materialism'. In the art context, see Bolt and Barrett (2013).
- 17 See Susan Lambert's contribution in Part III of this book; for an example from another historic discipline, see photography historian Geoffrey Batchen's speech 'Double displacement: photography and its ghosts' at the NSW Art Gallery *Photography* symposium 2015.
- 18 See José Roca's essay in Part II of this volume.

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