

A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

To give added sense to certain aspects of the works in *Practice and Process* it might be useful to situate them against more distant events and contexts. In this way I want to suggest that what is available to see in this fascinating exhibition depends to an extent on other *invisible* fields of force. Practices and processes are by their nature mobile, intangible and transitive. As such, they have tended to present the object-orientated art world with something of a problem. Unsellable, they remain in the artist's studio and printmaker's workshop. Nevertheless, such is the formative power of these forces that they determine the nature of what may or may not be produced as their outcome. At any given historical moment certain modes of practice and process will dominate at the expense of others, marking the art of that moment with their stamp. The following notes attempt to foreground some of this background.

Within and between mediums

Practice and Process invites us to consider a variety of artists' practices as they cross from one medium to another (i.e. various techniques of printmaking). The apparent ease with which this has been achieved belies not only the technical difficulties involved in these processes, but also the complexities of the intellectual, cultural and historical contexts from which the associated practices emerge. This may be easier to understand if we take a step back in time.

Modernism, it now seems, was a dominant but dying force in the 1960s art world. For twenty years or so its theories concerning the nature of art - as well as the correct ways of making and appreciating it - had held sway. As the decade progressed, however, these were increasingly challenged. According to its main proponents - critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried - the survival, vitality and destiny of each art form was dependent upon its capacity to ruthlessly rid itself of any excess feature that it might share with any other. Thus visual art was obliged, if it were to entrench and then progress, to expel any lingering traces of the literary or the theatrical. Further, each of the various media that constituted visual art - by which they meant painting and sculpture - was obliged to shun aspects of the other. Under such conditions the ideal painting would thus be abstract (having rejected the narrative responsibility of literature) and flat (having rejected sculpture's concern for three-dimensional forms located in space). In eschewing language and narrative, visual art would also abandon the medium of time and temporal development. The effect of the perfect work of art would be immediate and instantaneous. This is how Michael Fried summed it up on 1967:

"The concepts of quality and value - and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself - are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.... [For the modernist painting or sculpture] a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it." (Art and Objecthood)

Medium, Form and Content

Implicit in this Modernist account of art was the belief that content was to be identified with form, and - to borrow Marshal McLuhan's memorable phrase - that the medium was the message. The work of art was to be construed as a "deductive", self-referential structure. Frank Stella's shaped and striped canvases of the later 1960s were exemplary in this respect. The uniform width of each stripe, for example, was determined by the width of the brush used to apply the paint. This uniform width also corresponded to the depth, or 'thickness', of the painting's stretcher - the amount of its physical projection into space from the wall upon which it was hung. The configuration of the painted stripes followed the contours of the shaped canvas. Within this closed circuit of self-referentiality, each element of the painting - its physical structure, its process of production, its 'image' - was determined by all others. It referred to nothing but itself: "What you see," Stella confirmed, "is what you see." The 'content' of the work was thus inseparable from its form (and, inevitably, vice versa). Such effects were therefore utterly dependent upon the specific characteristics of the medium of painting and could not be directly transferred to any other medium. In fact, when Stella began producing prints based on the motifs of his stripe paintings, the focus of his interest shifted. Wary of simply 'reproducing' his paintings on a smaller scale, he used a lithographic crayon to introduce a range of loose and 'autographic' marks that were absent from the canvases, and he also de-centred the image on the

sheet so as to introduce a different set of figure-ground relations. (His experiments with shaping the sheet to correspond to the shape of the original canvas proved unsuccessful.) Despite being produced after the paintings, the sketch-like aspects of his prints suggested that they might even have preceded their models. Stella's original plan was also to present his series of prints in the form of an album, so that their viewing was linked - like the pages of a book - to a particular sequencing. Those Modernist practices and processes within which Stella was immersed disallowed the possibility that the same subject matter, content or "idea" could be transferred directly from one medium to another. In the transition from large shaped, painted canvas to the modestly sized lithographic process, the integrated, self-referential elements of his work began to fall apart and re-assemble into new configurations. The unity of these new configurations was no longer established by an all-at-once visual presence, but was now guaranteed by temporal delay - the sequencing of the series of individual prints, one after the other.

Another way of thinking about the Modernist approach discussed above would be to suggest that, for the Modernist, questions of form, content and subject matter should be derived from a consideration of the unique and specific characteristics of the medium involved. In other words, it would be pointless to expect the medium to respond to 'inappropriate' requests and demands. Such requests and demands would not allow the medium in question to fulfill its self-critical obligation, and thereby produce art (as opposed, in the case of painting for example, to merely acting as host to arbitrary pictures). All of this, of course, prompts the questions, 'How can we ever *know* what the special characteristics of any given medium might be? Are these characteristics absolute and 'given', or might they be subject to interpretation?' Greenberg himself had no doubt that each medium had an irreducible essence, and that all practice within that medium had the responsibility to address itself to said essence. As far as painting was concerned, Greenberg asserted that its essential identity was guaranteed by that aspect which it shared with no other art form: namely, the flatness of its support, the two-dimensional surface of its picture plane. It was to flatness, therefore, that painting should address itself above all else in order to secure its identity and validity. There is an indisputable element of truth in this claim to painting's condition of flatness but, as others have pointed out, there is a world of difference between proclaiming the unavoidable flatness of painting's surface as a *fact*, and prescribing how such a flat surface might be *used* purposefully.

Fact and Use

In saying this I mean to draw attention to a significant distinction between flatness and surface within painting. Flatness, I would want to argue, has a kind of metaphorical resonance within the discourse of Modernist image making which is denied to mere surface. Flatness is a condition within painting which has to be actively and consciously struggled for (it is an 'issue'), whereas surface is a mere technical given. Flatness has to be reclaimed from within the troublesome practices and processes of picture making - practices and processes which ensure that its pure realisation is never to be achieved. As Greenberg himself conceded;

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness.

Flatness is a question of contrived and controlled illusion: it is a kind of fiction, a consciously developed theme. Surface, on the other hand, lies within the simple order of fact. But it is the fictive nature of flatness which opens up its metaphorical possibilities: we want to read flatness as somehow signifying something beyond itself. The factuality of surface, on the other hand, offers no such incitement to interpretation and imaginative speculation.

Flatness - to put it another way - offers itself to be read as the expression of a meaningful intention on the part of the artist. In his essay "The Work of Art As Object" (1970), the philosopher Richard Wollheim considered some of these questions. All paintings, he stated, involve an operation on a surface. This much is self-evident. But, he continues;

To talk of the use of the surface and to contrast this with the fact of the surface, and to identify the former rather than the latter as the characteristic preoccupation of modern art, attributes to modern art a complexity that it cannot renounce.

To add flesh to this skeletal argument, Wollheim considered the case of Rothko whose mature work, he suggested, achieves a fine balance between two competing demands. Rothko's paintings' he concluded, ask of us, "whether we are to see the painting as containing an image within it or whether we are to see the painting as an image itself."

If Rothko managed to hold these two competing demands in fine balance, it seems that his successors opted for to pursue either one or the other. A stripe painting by Stella, as I have suggested, does not "contain" an image but could be thought to constitute "an image itself." Robert Rauschenberg's photo-silkscreen paintings of the same period, on the other hand, seem to accept the fact of the surface and to treat it as a ground which passively accepts the imprint of externally applied images. As Leo Steinberg observed in 1972,

...these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque horizontal flatbeds... The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards - any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed - whether coherently or in confusion.... The picture's 'flatness' was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor...

In treating the painting's picture plane as if it were a horizontal "flatbed" Rauschenberg not only opened painting to the practices and processes of printmaking, he also instigated - according to Steinberg - "the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture." From this moment hence, the medium-specific purity demanded by the Modernists was thoroughly compromised. The photographic images used as source material by Rauschenberg (and Warhol, for that matter) were 'borrowed' images, 'purloined' images, 'readymade' images. They were pre-existing images in which the world had already been 'pictured' and mediated by an agent other than the artist. They were, we might even say, 'copies'. In Rauschenberg's works we encounter, said Steinberg, "The picture conceived as the image of an image".

The practices and processes of painting, printmaking and photography were now tightly plaited. None could continue in quite the same way as before. The German painter Gerhard Richter began to take photographs of small abstract paintings, enlarge them, and then reproduce these photographic enlargements by means of paint on canvas. In a series of works produced in the mid-1980s, the American artist Philip Taaffe re-processed some of Brigit Riley's Op Art paintings using linocut techniques. In a manner parallel to Richter's abstract paintings, Taaffe took the impersonal, mechanical-looking imagery of Riley's painting, reproduced it by means of the skill and craft of low-tech printmaking techniques and then re-instated the original imagery on a larger scale. Within these complex practices and processes we are confronted with a series of contradictions, inversions and denials. Printmaking is used to simulate painting. Painting is used to reproduce photography. Hand production is opposed to mechanical reproduction. Techniques of reproduction and simulation are offered as signs of originality.

Having drawn the boundaries between the various art forms, the Modernists now policed them in vain: the floodgates had been opened. Not only were the lines between painting, photography and printmaking erased, the demarcation between sculpture and the two-dimensional arts was abolished. In the mid-fifties, for example, Robert Rauschenberg splashed some paint on a stuffed Angora goat, placed a rubber tyre around its middle, and then placed it on a low horizontal pedestal formed by one of his paintings. Was the resulting work (which was an early example of his appropriately named "Combines") to be thought of as a painting or a sculpture? It was impossible to decide. Even Stella's bulky paintings appeared to occupy physical space in a sculptural manner alarming to his Modernist supporters. Celebrating such media-crossing work, the artist Donald Judd proclaimed in 1965 that,

"Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture."

A group of young English sculptors (including John Hilliard) began to realise that their sculptural interests could best be pursued through the medium of photography. An American critic claimed that Robert Smithson's land art arose as a response to issues within painting. Installation art and Happenings emerged

from Cubist collage. Performance art had its roots in Jackson Pollock's painting technique. Filmmakers exhibited their work as sculptural installations. Medium-specific disciplines seemed to be consigned to the past. (An important distinction should perhaps be made - although it cannot be developed here - between Intermedia and Multimedia art. Intermedia art - a term coined by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins - refers to an artistic practice in which themes, concepts and ideas are pursued and explored across a range of media, such as we witness in this exhibition. Multimedia art, by contrast, refers to works of art combining several different media simultaneously.)

Moral

The little story I have told here has been told many times before. It is usually presented as a story of liberation, of freedom from the insufferable constraints of Modernist ideological tyranny. To an extent this may be true, but it is also worth remembering that no freedom is absolute, and that all freedoms entail a degree of responsibility. Further, to be free "from" something means that that "something" has set the terms of the ensuing freedom - albeit negatively. The freedom allowed to today's artists to migrate unchecked across various media, practices and processes is, like most freedoms, limited, contingent and tenuous. It arose from conflict and struggle, and will only be maintained by critical vigilance (the art world aggressively protects its vested power and interests just like any other). In common with most aspects of life, art is only purposeful if it engages with limits, testing in order to affirm or renegotiate them. When a painter, a sculptor, a photographer, a filmmaker, an installation or performance artist engages with printmaking they may mistake the limits of the practice and process they have now entered. Worse yet, they may be unaware of any limits, simply regarding it as 'business as usual'.

The full potential of printmaking is released only when its practices and processes are employed to produce an image, rather than merely reproduce one. This may already seem paradoxical, given that print is specifically a medium of reproduction. But the key here may be printmaking's relative inefficiency, its limitations as a technology of image reproduction. Compared with industrial techniques, it is slow and (usually) reliant upon human hands. In the early days of cinema, the projectionist was as much artist and performer as technician, adjusting the speed of projection with his hand to suit the emotional and dramatic tone of the on-screen action. The projector was his instrument, an extension of his body to be slowed or accelerated by muscular intervention. The days of such "practices and processes" in movie projection are long gone. In fact, speed, efficiency and uniformity are today's requirements in virtually all areas of image production and circulation. The globalisation of capital is perhaps the issue here. Although it assumes many forms in its erosion of traditional structures, globalisation nevertheless exhibits a pronounced tendency to convert all of reality into the virtual form of the photographically derived and reproduced image. All objects and relations are converted into the formulaic structures and non-differentiated surfaces of these infinitely reproducible images. Conventionalised appearances are the limit of its vocabulary. War must have a grainy quality, poverty thrives on high camera angles; love becomes sparkling eyes, smiling lips, regulation contours and proportions; the art object becomes its own reproduced illustration in a book or magazine. All signs of material production are to be erased. There is to be no friction, no resistance, no impediment to the free flow of images, of information and, ultimately, of capital.

If art wishes to distance itself from this free-flowing cascade of the dematerialized image, perhaps it should search out those moments of resistance when the image refuses to glide from one medium - or set of practices and processes - to another without protest. An unfamiliar process will almost certainly have a 'slowing' effect upon established practice, and at this point the artist may realise more keenly than usual that among the many unfinished processes to be continually engaged with is the learning process:

"He taught me everything I know about printmaking. He probably still does. He knows so much. It's a nice thing. He tells me how it's done. I say, 'can we do it this way?' And he sees if it can be done, or approximates it, or has a better idea. We keep working away at it. I don't know enough to get it myself."

(Frank Stella on his long-standing relation with printmaker Ken Tyler.)

John Calcutt, July 2005.