Classroom Practice

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE DIGITAL NATIVES

Steve Lovett

Figure 1: Evelyn Kawhiti, *Wahine Kauae Whakapapa*, 2009. Screen printed on both sides of a sheet of glass, image printed in four colours.

As an artist and art educator, my material and theoretical investigation in print seeks to make a contribution to the collective task of reinvesting in the medium.[1] My interest is in ensuring that print can continue to make a vital contribution to contemporary interdisciplinary art practices. My fear is that, with printmaking delivery in many art schools under pressure, the potential for printmaking and printmakers to contribute to contemporary art practices is reduced. Printmaking, in all its forms, contributes to a richer and more diverse set of interdisciplinary art practices. Without the "inter" component of interdisciplinary art practice that printmaking can deliver, the resulting default position is more of a single disciplinary art practice. This is a disciplinary practice that speaks to a potentially restrictive orthodoxy in art and art education. This may result in a narrowing of the scope of art discourse toward more neutral and centrist cultural positions that do not easily allow for difference.

I approach printmaking (both theoretical research and practical studio production) from two positions: as a professional practicing artist and as an educator working in tertiary contemporary visual arts education.[2] These dual roles create points of critique and observation on printmaking traditions in New Zealand. In the studio production, this creates opportunities to explore experimental approaches to developing new artworks through print processes. In the classroom, my dual roles as an artist and art educator necessitates critical engagement with the history of printmaking tradition and contemporary practice. I define printmaking traditions as a set of theoretical

discourses and practices shaped by dynamic artistic and cultural forces of change. The central question was, and it remains today, "*Is print just printmaking, an account of fetishised techniques?*" Or, "*Is print a more contentious practice that is always engaged with turbulent artistic, economic and cultural forces?* In our delivery of printmaking at Manukau School of Visual Arts, we propose a redefinition of printmaking as an expanding field of practices responsive to open and diverse theoretical positions. This approach situates printmaking and print practitioners (*always*) at the most incisive edge of contemporary cultural production. This is one of Ruth Pelzer's underlying messages in "Craft/Technik."[3] Pelzer argues that technology continuously exerts a transformative force within printmaking, changing modes of print production, delivery and the surface aesthetics of printed images. The technological change to printmaking practices brought on by the influence of photography and new media has shifted the printmaking terrain in ways that now cannot be ignored. The fact of technological and conceptual change to art practices is, in my view, one of the fundamental print traditions that we can present to our students. This dynamic view of printmaking practices continues to situate the medium among the most powerful critical, economic, aesthetic and political engines driving cycles of change, innovation, regeneration, maturity and renewal.

As educators, we need to research and present to our students that printmaking, driven by dynamic historical forces, engages with and continues to participate in the world of images that we respond to. This is a more expansive view of printmaking history, tradition and contemporary practice. Dürer's use of Gutenberg's press to print wood-type prints provides a useful practice model for contemporary practitioners. Dürer's use of what were in the fifteenth century the most advanced image-making processes available can show our students an artist making use of technology as it "falls out of" industry. This same model can be applied to the printmaking processes of engraving, etching and lithography in the eighteenth century, and screen-printing in the twentieth century. Therefore, as educators we need to challenge the rather strange notions that printmaking is today only the outcome of historically determined and culturally isolated techniques, and that this history is at a terminal point. As educators we must remember that, in the theatre of critical art actions, printmaking is always an agent of change.

Figure 2: Alana Webb, 2006. Installation view of Year 4 studio, handprinted wallpaper.

An unavoidable issue in contemporary printmaking is the confronting force of new ideas, new materials and new digital technologies on the maintenance of a narrow view of printmaking traditions. This confrontation demands reconsideration by artists and art educators of our modes of practice and what we deliver to students. In this challenge, there are opportunities in the contemporary interdisciplinary visual arts to reinvent printmaking for our students through the ongoing reappraisal of materials, processes and printmaking contexts. I am aware of the difficulties of finding practical solutions to the challenges of printmaking delivery in our classrooms and printmaking studios. Yet the task has acquired an increasing urgency, as many teachers, students, practitioners and art professionals have turned away from printmaking as a viable area of art practice. To address these issues we need to evaluate what new technology (including digital technology), new non-toxic materials and new practice contexts have to offer for students, educators and artists. Our preparedness to embrace the new in printmaking again is a willingness to expand the field of practice, adding to and shifting established dialogues, opening new critical questions for students and educators alike.

The digital in printmaking need not be intimidating. It is certainly a fact that anybody over 15 years of age engaging with digital artwork will be, like myself, a "digital immigrant."[4] Like immigrants everywhere we are connected to at least two cultures. This can be advantage. We are able to engage in both analogue and digital modes of visual culture, using these variable modes of thought to facilitate artmaking and related contextual discussion with the new digital natives[5] who are increasingly the students in printmaking studios. Recognising that, as digital immigrants, we are able to speak across a range of positions within contemporary printmaking, our delivery will facilitate interdisciplinary practice dialogues which emerge out of graphic design, time-based, post-object media and the fine arts.

This shift in practice is required today, as this is one of the moments in the history of printmaking for change. For the continued relevance of printmaking to an interdisciplinary visual culture we need to expand what we choose to recognise as printmaking. As art educators and as practitioners we will need to decouple contemporary printmaking from the necessity of conforming to the historical constraints of high art alone, initiating a reconsideration of the relationship printmaking has with print design, drawing, painting, photography and sculpture.[6] This work will involve a reconsideration of the contemporary interface printmaking can have with the expanding field[7] of new media and publishing options. Reconsidering the relationship printmaking has with contemporary media and practice is *not* about replacing historical tradition with novelty. It is, in my view, about allowing printmaking to actively respond to and engage with opportunities for artists to embrace the latest available imagemaking

Figure 3: Laura Robertson, *poem #10*, 2009. Gel transfer and screen print on wood panels.

technology to facilitate the expression of new ideas in visual form. To regard printmaking in this way will open the prospect for printmakers to operate in an expanded field of practices.[8] This will require new terms to describe altered relationships with inherited notions of what will constitute printmaking practice, skill, labour, craft and commodity values. A willingness to expand print discourses will make it possible for artists, educators and students to creatively engage with the medium to investigate concepts emerging from distinct fields of material and theoretical investigation within printmaking, reappraising the interplay between high art and popular culture.[9]
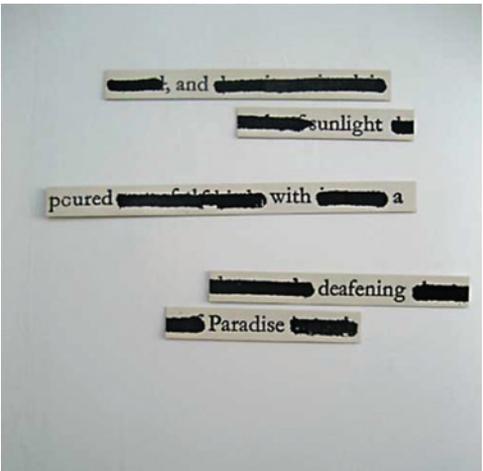
Today, students arrive in our classrooms and print studios engaged with new media –these are the digital natives Prensky described in 2001.[10] Their presence amongst us exerts dynamic change on learning culture, visual literacy and printmaking culture. The integration of digital culture into their everyday lives indicates that there are substantive tectonic changes occurring in the meaning of (visual) literacy for these students.[11] For the digital native, electronic equipment, software, file-sharing sites and online communities (amongst other non-textual and not hands-on media) are often the main sources of information experience and creative expression. As a result, these students have a very different relationship to visual culture and digital technologies.[12] Their use of digital media takes on subversive and highly personalised forms that contradict notions of entanglement in reductive creative choices, closely linked with empirical scientific and business models.[13]As art educators, we should not underestimate the influence student engagement with the look and form of new media has with the ways that our students approach visual culture, including printmaking. Informed by their exposure to and engagement with contemporary media, these students have developed art-making skills that do not necessarily involve the use of actual paints, brushes, liquid inks, presses, plates or blocks.[14] For these students, to start a printmaking experience with the "old" and available technology of dry point on plastic, or to use an elderly press, may produce nothing more than a stillborn image that bears little relationship to what they perceive as their visual culture, the world of shiny new media. For these students, an overemphasised focus on narrowly defined artisanal craft technique can be both alienating and restrictive. What is required from art educators is that we engage in a digital dialogue with our students to introduce them to the possibilities of printmaking.

This involves approaches to printmaking contexts that encompass popular culture and new technologies, and simultaneously acknowledge printmaking's longstanding art-historical practice contexts. This involves raising our gaze from the contingencies of materials and process to again invest in printmaking as a field of research and practice with the ability to dynamically infect and inflect interdisciplinary cultural visual arts activity.The resulting shifts in practice modes will result in a hybridised form of printmaking that can

Figure 4: Jacqueline Roach, *untitled Warp#3*, 2009. Gel transfer applied to aluminium, single detail from installation.
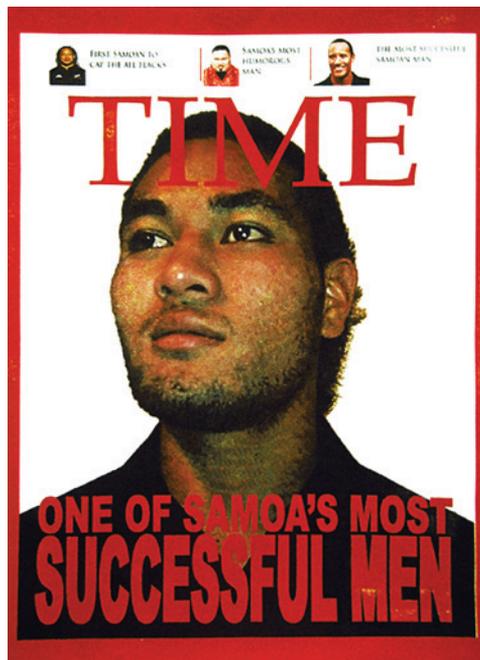

Figure 5: Augusto Aokuso, *Time Now*, 2009. Four colour process screen print developed from *Time* magazine cover.

be more aware of and address an expanding range of contemporary visual arts practices and student learning outcomes. This shift does not always necessitate immediate and prohibitive investment in expensive new equipment. This shift *will* require a renegotiating of resource access, allocation and control within studio programmes.

As educators, our first task in making a shift to reinvigorate printmaking delivery will be to reinvest in the scope of the print practices and references that we provide to our students. The 2008 Examiners' Report for Level 3 in printmaking suggests that there is a tendency to rely on limited artist practice references. This may have had the effect of directing the focus of student research along perhaps overly defined pathways, leaving little scope for innovative discovery. It also appears to be true that there is no actual impediment to art educators presenting to students an expanding range of artists and designers who investigate visual culture through print practice. This expansion, it seems to me, would be in step with the intentions of the New Zealand Curriculum Achievement Objectives Level 7 & 8.

As an art educator, I am concerned with the questions and opportunities for printmaking delivery to students that facilitate engagement with contemporary media and its contexts and operate from an informed historical awareness of a medium shaped by technological and social change. As I have outlined above, printmaking, when consciously operating from this informed position, is at its most incisive and operates at the leading edge of mass communication technology currently available to artists. As an educator and practitioner engaging with printmaking from this informed position, I am presented with the opportunity to re-evaluate questions of pedagogical ownership and delivery of new digital art-making technology in relation to printmaking delivery programmes in our schools and universities. The writings of Deborah Wye,[15] Marilyn Kushner,[16] Professor Carole Shepheard[17] and Sasha Grishin[18] propose that we can legitimately ask the question: Who it is that gets to apply digital technology (in the classroom and to which groups of students) and for what ends? In the best of all possible worlds it would be art teachers *and* technology, and media studies teachers who will deliver new media technology to students. It is critical therefore, that we question access to new technology delivery in art programmes for students not focused on design or photography courses. It is equally important that we explore ways to facilitate printmaking delivery intersecting with questions that arise from design, photography and new media.

The Territorial Divide[19] in New Zealand printmaking was first described by Professor Carole Shepheard; in her argument she identifies a divided territory without significant points of exchange between the analogue and the digital. In 1996 this divide was between practitioners (both emerging and established) and arts professionals. I suggest that the questions Professor Shephard raised in 1996 are now of even greater urgency. Today the territorial divide in printmaking practices is more acutely positioned between institutions on one side of the divide and students, the digital natives[20] who will become our future practitioners, on the other. Whatever the reasons for the reluctance to address these curatorial issues in the past, today we have an opportunity to make intellectual and capital reinvestments in printmaking delivery that takes account of new contexts, critical frameworks, technologies and materials. Our teaching delivery must begin to facilitate these points of exchange.

The task of developing new visual knowledge is predicated on expanding the field of printmaking practices and contexts to encourage students to work across and between diverse areas of contemporary interdisciplinary visual art and design. This is a chance to be innovative and reinvest in an expanding range of practices that transform the printmaking medium, its delivery and reception. The dynamic present tense of art practices is difficult, fractious, post-postmodern and interdisciplinary. Therefore, as art educators we must engage with contemporary approaches to printmaking practices that directly interface with the increasingly digital worlds of our students and retain links with the analogue world of material culture. Our work is to reinterpret and re-present to our students notions of materiality, skill, craft and industry that can reanimate printmaking in a conceptually driven visual-arts culture characterised by post-object and post-photographic studio practices. This work we undertake will see us better able to continue to expand the field of printmaking practices,[21] ensuring a greater degree of relevance for the medium and its future practitioners.

Steve Lovett is a visual arts practitioner and art educator with an extensive print-based knowledge. Steve has taught printmaking at Manukau School of Visual Arts since 1995 and has been section leader for printed media since 1997.

Lovett's research interests are primarily concerned with questions of loss, and the narratives of location and displacement in print practices. He has also focused on the impact of new imaging technologies on more traditional printmaking practices.

Lovett has an extensive local, national and international exhibition record. He has demonstrated successful academic management of the print programme and the first-year programmes at Manukau School of Visual Arts.

In 2006 Steve Lovett was awarded the Graphic Arts Award at the XIX Ibiza Biennale, Ibiza, Spain.

1   This work is undertaken by many art educators, curators, practitioners and students. However, anecdotal evidence appears to indicate a reduction in NCEA Level 2 and 3 student folios presented for external assessment. These figures suggest that a very low number – between 150 and 200 print portfolios – were presented in 2008. This figure is set against the approximately 2500 painting and design portfolios for the same year. Capital and intellectual underinvestment in printmaking delivery compounds the effects of our changing relationships to imaging technology and materials and technology. But this is not the last act for printmaking.

2   In conversation with Trace Williams Auckland Printmaker and Art Educator, December 2008/January 2009.

3   Ruth Pelzer-Montada, "Craft/Technik," presentation at "Foul Biting? Theoretical Diversions in Printmaking," a panel discussion chaired by Malcolm Payne, IMPACT International Print Conference, Berlin 2005.

4   Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, 9:5, October 2001 (MCB University Press).

5   Ibid.

6   GJ Fyfe, "Art and Reproduction: Some Aspects of the Relations between Painters and Engravers in London 1760-1850," in *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader*, eds J Palmer and M Dodson (London: Routledge, 1995), 196-208.

7   R Weisberg, "Critical Theory and Print," *Contemporary Impressions*, 1:2, Fall 1993.

8   Ibid.

9   K Varnedoe and A Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: MOMA, 1990), 19.

10   Prensky, "Digital Natives."

11   D Welch, "The L Word," *New Zealand Listener*, 25 October 2008.

12   J Rain, "The Generation Game," in *Echoes: Contemporary Art in the Age of Endless Conclusions*, ed F Bonami (New York: Monacelli Press, 1996), 48-54.

13   S Penny, "The Virtualisation of Art Practice: Body Knowledge and the Engineering World View," *CAA Art Journal,* Fall 1997.

14   Rain, "The Generation Game."

15   D Wye, *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980-1995* (New York: MOMA, 2002).

16   M Kushner, *Digital: Printmaking Now* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1999).

17   C Shepheard, "The Territorial Divide: Issues in Contemporary New Zealand Printmaking," Unpub. MPhil thesis (University of Auckland, 1997).

18   S Grishin, *Imprint: The Journal of Australian Printmaking*, Fall 2007, 18-24.

19   Shepheard, "The Territorial Divide," 87-8.

20   Prensky, "Digital Natives."

21   Weisberg, "Critical Theory and Print."