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Printmaking Today: Printmaking in the Midst of Rapid Imaging

Michael Binuko Sri Herawan¹, Deden Hendan Durahman²

Abstract

The debate and tug-of-war between conventional printmaking and non-conventional printmaking in Indonesia indicates that this branch of art is adapting to change. Printmaking conventions emphasise the quality and skill (printmaking proper) of techniques, as well as the necessary conditions to be worthy of the label "printmaking," before focusing on content. Meanwhile, expanded or expansive printmaking seeks to break the boundaries of convention and explores new opportunities. Both conventional and expanded/expansive printmaking are essential. Printmaking conventions play a vital role in educating the public and novice collectors about the fundamental aspects of craftsmanship and beauty. Additionally, editions—which are part of conventions—make printmaking more affordable. On the other hand, expanded or expansive printmaking is necessary to adapt and accommodate the latest technological developments, producing a variety of new hybrid possibilities and opening up opportunities for ideas and discourse that are crucial in attracting the attention of the mainstream contemporary art scene. This research attempts to further understand printmaking as a medium, not only through images but also through the processes, materials, and stages involved in it. Meaning in a medium can be deeply personal and arbitrary, but it cannot serve as a conceptual basis. When viewed as a medium, the various techniques in printmaking transcend mere techniques.

Keywords: *Print As Medium, Printmaking, Concept, Conventional Printmaking, Expanded Printmaking.*

Introduction

In 2020, AC Andre Tanama released a book titled "Cap Jempol: Seni Cetak Grafis dari Nol (Thumbprint: The Art of Printmaking from Zero)," which was followed three years later by Syahrizal Pahlevi's "Dikutuk Disumpahi Eros (Cursed Sworn by Eros: A Collection of Printmaking Notes 2009-2023)". The significance of these two books by printmaking activists cannot be overstated, given that while there is considerable writing about Indonesian printmaking, it tends to be scattered across exhibition catalogues. In addition to the challenges often faced by printmakers in Indonesia, these two books also reflect the efforts and optimistic spirit of Indonesian printmakers.

In Indonesia, in particular, there continues to be debate and tension between conventional printmaking and non-conventional printmaking. In the curatorial notes for the "Tarung Grafis" exhibition, Asmudjo J. Irianto wrote, "In the contemporary era, which is fast-paced, digital and uncertain, it has become a category whose boundaries are often contested, indicating that this category is moving to adapt to change." (Irianto: 2022). It is worth noting that the exhibition held at Lawangwangi Creative Space deliberately brought together two camps of conventional and non-conventional printmakers, or to quote the terms used by Asmudjo, namely expanded and expansive. The conventional side is quite clear; they emphasise quality and technical skills,

¹ Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia, Email: m.binuko.contact@gmail.com

² Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia.



as well as the conditions needed to qualify as printmaking before targeting content. Meanwhile, the expanded/expansive camp is more a group that attempts to break the boundaries of convention and seek new opportunities.

Overall, Asmudjo acknowledged that both conventional printmaking and expanded/expansive printmaking are essential. Printmaking conventions aid in educating the public and novice collectors about fundamental aspects of craftsmanship and beauty. Furthermore, editions (which are part of these conventions) make printmaking more accessible. Conversely, expanded/expansive printmaking is also necessary to adapt to the latest technological advancements, enabling the production of a range of new hybrid possibilities and fostering opportunities for ideas and discourse essential for capturing the attention of the mainstream contemporary art scene. This curatorial note compares Indonesian printmaking to a magnet with two poles in one body, highlighting their interdependence.

Katyn Reeves said "Printmaking proper" must engage with new technologies, reversals, and opposition, and with reproduction modes that include neither the pain nor the pleasure of touching materials. Artists who choose to work with print media and print thought must resist the conceptual framework of binary opposition and try to bridge the huge spaces between opposites" (Reeves: 2016). 'Printmaking proper' refers to the traditional area of printmaking practice.

In one of the chapters in his book, "Dikutuk Disumpahi Eros (Cursed Sworn by Eros: A Collection of Printmaking Notes 2009-2023)" Syahrizal Pahlevi writes that there is a tension between media and technique in viewing printmaking itself (Pahlevi: 2023). According to him, this difference in perspective affects the level of militancy towards printmaking. In this book, Pahlevi sees printmaking as a medium, not just a technique. He argues that printmaking is a fine art medium that grapples with technical issues. Technique, with its complexities at each stage, is the backbone of printmaking; if it is not understood and mastered, it is impossible for an artist to create the graphic work they desire.

However, viewing printmaking merely as a technique led to the belief that the Pahlevi would only produce "transit" printmakers who would eventually change media, as they felt that a technique wasn't worthy of defence. Printmakers also became less enthusiastic about creating printmaking because it is seen as merely a technique learned during college that can be abandoned at any time if they're interested in other techniques.

According to Pahlevi, viewing printmaking as a medium provides many benefits for the practice itself. Firstly, artists do not easily switch media, as it is far more common to change techniques. Artists will also become more passionate about their work because they have something worth fighting for. Indirectly, the number of printmakers will increase, as university graduates who study printmaking will be less likely to switch media. Pahlevi optimistically hopes that if this occurs, the number of printmakers will rise, which in turn will also boost the production of artworks.

This article in Pahlevi's book sparked my interest in further understanding printmaking as a medium. An artist can express the symbolic messages in their work not only through images, but also through the processes, materials, and stages involved. While meaning in a medium can be quite personal and arbitrary, it shouldn't serve as a conceptual foundation. If we view the various techniques in printmaking as a medium rather than just techniques, it's entirely possible that in the future, printmakers in Indonesia will engage more actively in printmaking due to their

awareness of the medium they're passionate about. This could ultimately lead to the emergence of specialists in each technique, with depth and specificity in their craft. Furthermore, through this indirect publication, more people may develop an interest in printmaking.

Research Methods

The methods in this research include theoretical and historical study methods, as well as visual hermeneutics. The theoretical and historical study methods aim to explore the transformation of printmaking from traditional practices to expanded printmaking. This study is conducted through an in-depth analysis of literature, exhibition curation, and writings of relevant figures. This process traces the development of printmaking over time, both in local and international contexts, to understand shifts in values, practices, and concepts that accompany changing times. In this way, this method situates printmaking within a broader framework, connecting it to social, cultural, and technological dynamics.

The analysis was conducted by reviewing historical narratives found in exhibition catalogs such as "Tarung Grafis" and literary references, including Syahrizal Pahlevi's work in his book *Dikutuk Disumpahi Eros: A Collection of Notes on Printmaking 2009–2023*. This study also examines the theoretical perspectives that accompany printmaking practice; for instance, Kathryn Reeves' ideas about the shift in the concept of printmaking proper and its role in shaping contemporary printmaking. Within this framework, theoretical and historical study methods not only reconstruct significant events but also interpret their influence on the development of printmaking as a dynamic medium, thus providing a basis for redefining the position of printmaking within contemporary art.

By highlighting the significance of dialogue between tradition and innovation, this method assists in mapping the role of printmaking in shaping historical narratives and fostering the emergence of new perspectives. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will offer a robust theoretical foundation for printmaking research and deepen understanding of the relevance of printmaking in both the present and future.

The visual hermeneutics method in this research is an interpretive approach that focuses on the meaning of the symbolism contained in visual elements, creative processes, and the printmaking medium itself. Elements such as the matrix, ink, and printing techniques are the subjects of study to understand how each aspect conveys a deeper meaning. For example, the matrix is often thought of as the "womb" that gives birth to works of art, reflecting the fundamental nature of printmaking as a medium that involves processes of creation and transformation. In the reduction cutting technique, the journey from one layer of colour to the next depicts an artist's conceptual and physical journey, where the final result can only be enjoyed after the entire process is complete. This approach not only highlights explicit meanings but also explores the symbolic relationship between the work of art, the process of its creation, and the artist's personal and cultural experiences.

Visual hermeneutics also broadens the analysis to the narrative and contextual dimensions of printmaking. This approach takes into account cultural and historical contexts, along with the artist's intentions and audience perceptions when interpreting works of art. For instance, the interaction between oil and water in lithography is understood not only as a technical phenomenon but also as a metaphor for conflict and coexistence, representing the idea of resistance or cooperation. Furthermore, the reversal of images in the printing process is seen as a symbolic act that reflects concepts of duality, mirroring, and inversion, relevant to both

personal and social narratives. By integrating material, visual, and contextual analysis, this approach provides richer insights into printmaking as a conceptual medium that transcends technical aspects, allowing works of printmaking to convey complex and meaningful narratives.

Result and Discussion

Matrix and Mirrored Image:

Etymologically, "matrix" comes from Latin, meaning "uterus." In printmaking, matrices play an important role. Every printmaking piece, whether an edition or a monoprint, is created by a matrix. If we extend the meanings of the womb and giving birth further, we might be able to perceive the feminine nature inherent in printmaking. Printmaking is, and has historically been, gender-coded 'feminine' (Reeves: 1999).

The process of creating work in printmaking can also be compared to the process of conception. Each action of cutting a line in a linocut, for instance, resembles the development of a fetus in the womb (ignoring the period that may not extend to 9 months).

Then, if we consider the viewpoint that printmaking must be multiple, identical twins will emerge from the womb. Conversely, if we posit that printmaking does not require multiplicity, it might be that the matrix gives birth to a single child.

The question an artist might ask is, at what point will this metaphor continue to be drawn? Up to a certain point, we will see that the matrix resembles a single parent. If you look further, the absence of a matrix in an exhibition of graphic works will feel like a loss. However, if this awareness is interpreted creatively by an artist, it could subtly represent past experiences that parents may not perceive as present.

Apart from being seen as a body that tells the story of the artist's life experience, the matrix can also be viewed as a recording device. An artist generally considers what to include in their work, particularly in printmaking, which is often regarded as labor-intensive. Given that this process is not as swift as that of recording digital photography, artists tend to be more selective in choosing the concerns or emotions they wish to convey in their artwork.

Whether we realise it or not, in producing images using lithography, we are essentially taking advantage of the hostility between oil and water. We use a material containing fat (grease), which is also hydrophobic, to record images on a plate. At the ready-to-print stage, we wet the plate with water. Parts that have been exposed to fat will, of course, repel water because they are hydrophobic. After that, using concentrated oil-based ink, we roll the ink onto the stone. This time, it is water that repels the oil-based ink, and the ink will only adhere to the fatty parts. The phenomenon of hostility between water and oil has been known for a long time in human civilisation, yet perhaps not many people realise that this phenomenon has strong potential if it is explored in works that (for example) deal with the themes of war, conflict, or social rejection.

Each image recorded on the matrix is essentially unfinished, making it difficult for us to appreciate it fully. When an artist employs reduction cutting techniques, what he observes in the matrix are merely gradual, incomplete fragments of information. This begins with the first colour (cut or not), followed by the gouge process before printing the next layer of colour, then additional cuts, and so on until a printed image emerges as he originally designed. Besides being time-consuming, this process also prevents the artist from seeing the final result in the matrix. The artist can only view the outcome of his work once each colour layer has been printed, leaving the matrix he worked on merely as the platform used to print the final colour. In the deep printing

technique, we see only reflections or shine from the metal plate used, along with nicks or chips that have been inscribed on the plate. After inking and printing, we can finally appreciate the image contained within the plate. This process can be seen as a journey or life experience, where we can only witness the results of our accomplishments after reaching the goals we set. Likewise, in discussing development, we can only clearly perceive the impact of a development once it is completed and put into use.

Everyone who has ever created graphic work knows that an image designed on a matrix will appear upside down when printed. This scenario also adds an element of surprise for a printmaker. After spending considerable time crafting an image of a face looking to the right on a plate, for example, when it is printed on paper, the face will then look to the left. Even for a printmaker with extensive experience, who has anticipated this and has flipped the sketch before working on the matrix, this experience still evokes a sense of wonder. Imagine spending days grappling with a specific orientation in the matrix, only to find that when it comes out of the printing machine, that orientation is reversed.

In her article "Printmaking: Reflective and Receptive Impressions in the Therapeutic Process", Michelle L. Dean writes that, "Reversed images hold symbolic expression much in the same way a person sees himself or herself in the mirror... Printmaking has the potential to tap into both sophisticated intellectual abilities as well as into the emerging primal process, spanning the formed and unformed aspects of the self" (Dean: 2016).

Presence came from Absence:

The collaboration between presence and absence may not be unique to printmaking; rather, it is a concept that extends across all branches of fine art. Through visual considerations, artists create negative space in their work so that the subject they wish to emphasise stands out more. Even in drawings, we can appreciate the presence of scratch marks when they contrast with the white of the paper.

In intaglio, the term "matrix" generally refers to a flat, smooth metal plate. In Indonesia, this intaglio technique is commonly referred to as deep printing, as the area that holds the ink is the inner part, also known as the grooves. These overdrifts are created by thinning specific parts of the matrix, either through an acidification process or direct etching.

When we chip the lino, we create deep gullies in the matrix. However, when printed, the ditches appear only as thin deboss or perhaps what shows is merely flatness accompanying the colour of the ink. In screen printing, the presence of mesh holes in the screen is replaced by the density of colour that filters through. Topography, holes, and strife (water and oil in lithography) meld into entirely different forms. No longer rough sheets of wood or metal, they have transformed into a hybrid plane, much like the melting pot of cultures. Instead of eliminating printmaking, it actually merges the material from which it is made. When a work using the screen printing technique is presented before the eye, although the screen is not displayed, one can envision the presence of the screen along with the squeegee movement that pushes the ink. For even though they are not visible, these materials and tools cannot be separated.

In one of the intaglio techniques, etching, when we work on a matrix for intaglio, we create ink traps by removing certain parts of the matrix through an acidification process. The missing parts, often referred to as indentations or grooves, play a crucial role in holding the ink, which will later be transferred to the paper after passing through the printing process.

If artists can creatively interpret this process, it will enhance the concept of selecting the medium itself. In our mortal world, loss is something we cannot avoid; whether we're ready or not, we will inevitably face it. However, the process of accepting loss also shapes who we are today. An artist might choose etching due to its connection to the idiom of loss.

In drypoint, the artist deliberately incises cuts into the plate. Similar to the grooves in etching, the cuts and nicks in drypoint will later hold the ink. We can relate this process of scarring to environmental issues such as the Anthropocene, where humans are viewed as the primary agents responsible for the current appearance and topography of the Earth, as well as for its destruction and the ongoing mass extinction.

The Role of Multiplication in Printmaking

The multiplicative nature of propaganda became integral to the Indonesian people's struggle for independence. During the pre-independence period, stencil techniques were used to create posters that boosted the fighting spirit of soldiers. History records that Baharuddin Marasutan and Mochtar Apin were also noted for utilising the multiplicative nature of printmaking in their work on the Linoleographs project (Siregar: 2017). This project, which involved collaboration between the two artists and the Secretariat of the Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Foreign Relations Section, was published on 17 August 1946 to coincide with the first anniversary of Indonesian independence. A total of 36 packages of printed works from the two artists were sent to various countries that recognised Indonesia's sovereignty and independence. Siregar added that this was a form of positive propaganda.

The multiplicative nature of printmaking, defined as producing more than one print, presents an advantage that must be preserved. Once a printmaker has completed their specified number of editions, the printing plate must be damaged or destroyed to prevent any further reproductions.

In Indonesia, this multiplicative nature is seen as detrimental to printmaking because it is viewed as not exclusive to collectors. Some printmakers end up experimenting with other methods, such as stacking prints by hand-colouring or colouring the plates, and printing only once. However, if you reassess the situation, the doubling subtly suggests an anti-exclusive nature.

Syahrizal Pahlevi, in his book "Cursed and Sworn to Eros," argues that the multiple aspect is a logical consequence of the use of printing techniques (Pahlevi: 2023). However, in his writings, he describes the nature of multiplication as a convention that is either broken or abandoned. Pahlevi supports this view with the backing of observers who appear to agree that printmaking wouldn't progress if it merely followed existing conventions.

So how can printmaker creatively respond to this multiplicative nature? In an exhibition of graphic works, it is normal for only one edition to be displayed, because it is assumed that the results of the other editions will be identical. But that doesn't mean this can't be done. Setiawan Sabana was someone who pioneered this kind of presentation in his exhibition in 1989 (Supriyanto: 2000). It is not impossible for a printmaker to then create work that is distributed, for example, resembling a sign system. Placements that don't always hang on the wall, even graphic works have the potential to be displayed outside the gallery.

This multiplicative nature may hold greater potential in the realm of publication and information dissemination than in conceptual frameworks. However, the multiplicative aspect of graphic techniques has also facilitated the rapid spread of religion, science, and propaganda. Works discussing information dissemination remain relevant, especially when conveyed through the

medium of printmaking. That boundary is represented by the internet. Through the internet, we can access various information quickly and even engage in real-time correspondence. However, one aspect the internet lacks, which printmaking possesses, is a tangible physical form. If the theme or concept of the work addresses information alongside physical form, then using printmaking as a medium remains pertinent. Furthermore, the lifespan of websites on the internet is relatively short, with information that can change at any moment. Academics may be familiar with the restrictions on adapting data from the internet due to these limitations.

The multiplicative nature of graphics allows graphic works to be exhibited in several locations at the same time. Practically, this situation enables you to submit open calls to multiple venues simultaneously without worrying about scheduling conflicts. This potential may not be recognised by many young printmakers. As far as I know, at least in Indonesia, no one has held exhibitions in multiple locations with the same graphic work at the same time.

The multiplicative nature of graphic work has also led to the practice of print and portfolio exchanges. This tradition is exemplified each year by the Printmaking Studio RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology), Australia, and IPEP (International Printmaking Exchange Program), India.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In printmaking, visible images are not the only ones capable of holding meaning. Processes, mediums, and techniques have an inherent potential to convey various meanings implicitly. This is implied because the equipment, machines, and even the matrix do not appear alongside the work; they have melted and frozen within the work itself. If the various processes involved in printmaking are interpreted in-depth and linked to a theme, then the printmaker will find idioms, symbols, or signs that suit their theme. The printmaker will arrive at medium-specific thinking, where only with that medium will their work truly speak. This idea does not imply that a printmaker cannot be flexible and fulfil their artistic aspiration by exploring other mediums; quite the opposite. By planting roots in the realm of printmaking, an artist will gain the awareness to bring ideas and traces of their printmaking into every artistic event they undertake. Instead of abandoning it because graphic techniques couldn't facilitate their ideas, they expanded their understanding of printmaking through other mediums. Printmaking will remain the essence that calls them back.

Recommendation

1. Encourage artists to integrate digital technology with traditional graphic techniques to enhance exploration of the medium.
2. Utilise the multiplicative nature for broader publication of artworks, such as print exchanges or simultaneous exhibitions.
3. Provide an educational platform that highlights printmaking as a conceptual medium rather than just a technique.

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