

In Praise of Process

Jennifer L. Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024, 232 pages with 117 colour and 14 black and white illustrations, € 35.00, ISBN 978-0-691-25585-9

Reviewed by Lyrene Kühn-Botma

Early on in *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, Jennifer L. Roberts dedicates an entire page to an in-studio photograph of Robert Rauschenberg in the process of assembling and wetting newspaper sheets on one of the largest press beds I have ever seen (20; fig. 1.8). The photograph captures a moment of *process* – a fraction of a second in what was likely many hours spent on and around a huge, perfectly levelled, bed of a printing press. Rauschenberg and Robert Peterson, fellow printmaker and assistant printer at the time, are captured adding solvents to newspaper and materials on the press bed in an attempt to solubilize the newspaper ink for eventual transfer onto a sheet of fabric laid out underneath this three-dimensional collage. In the background of the photograph you see onlookers, an audience witnessing this seemingly spontaneous choreography between artist, printer, studio, and lithography press.

As an artist and printmaker myself, I closely relate to this moment the author stages. The photograph is pregnant with potential; it invites spontaneous imaginings of what the artist is thinking and conjuring at this juncture in his

process. This is in no small part thanks to Jennifer Roberts' sensitive and skilful exposition of the artist's process in the three pages that lead up to the evocative photograph. And still, this miniature apotheosis is merely one of many such moments comprising Roberts' *own* reflective writing process as author of this book: to put the reader into virtual sensuous contact with printmaking as a tangible process and, in this way, to experience the kind of influence it exerts on creative minds both within and beyond the discipline.

Overall, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print* aims to introduce, re-introduce, and, thereby, elevate the stature of print and printmaking as a distinctive role player in global art and visual culture. And the result is an indispensable manual on the medium of print and key histories of its varied manifestations across the world. What intrigues, however, is Roberts' ability to mesh this broad vision with an insider's appreciation for the subtleties and technical intricacies of printmaking. Indeed, for Roberts, artistic ideas, experimentation, and conceptual foundations are inseparable from the medium. Major and complex aspects of printmaking are channelled conceptually as the foundation to connect artistic themes. The process, material, techniques, and characteristics of the medium animate the artist's conceptual framework and practice. The ideas that spontaneously grow in the midst of process is indivisible from the conceptual origin of the art created, and the artist as the omphalos of process ties all of this together.

Printmaking processes inform the layout and methodical structure of the book. The conceptual organization of the book thus performs the scaffolded nature of printmaking itself, enlightening both the seasoned printmaking professional and the uninitiated reader new to the medium. Instead of structuring the book

Corresponding author:

Lyrene Kühn-Botma

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
email: kuhn1@ufs.ac.za

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zkg-2025-3013>

according to technique or specific process, Roberts unpacks printmaking through core characteristics and ideas attached to the medium. The successive chapters are *Pressure* (Chapter 1), *Reversal* (Chapter 2), *Separation* (Chapter 3), *Strain* (Chapter 4), *Interference* (Chapter 5), and *Alienation* (Chapter 6) – supported at every turn by over a hundred figures of some of the most striking historical examples of prints and contemporary artworks carrying print in some way.

The thoughtful design of the book likewise echoes various idiosyncrasies inherent to printmaking. Registration marks are evident on chapter title pages and elsewhere throughout the book to make the reader aware of the overlooked, unseen details of the medium usually only revealed to those who print – be it by hand or digitally. Pages have mirror image text, which is then copied exactly – as if printed from – on the next page. This also serves to familiarise those who do not print themselves, with the *feeling* of the process. The copyright page and title page of the book can be seen in mirrored spreads. The mirrored ‘stencil’ to the left suggesting a silk-screen stencil, while the right suggests the stencil printed through with ink. These page spreads replicate both an integral printmaking rule – the transferral of a mirror image onto the print being pulled – as well as the reiteration of the undeniable characteristic of contact that permeates all printmaking processes at some point.

Roberts repeats the message with every chapter in the book: artists intimately involve process and techniques in their conceptualisation and execution of their work, which contributes to a greater understanding of intricate and diverse techniques in printmaking. By creatively connecting themes such as pressure and contact, words often associated with and used in the printmaking studio, with ideas of tactility, presence, intimacy, loss, separation, and memory, Roberts enables the reader to read prints, artworks and printmaking processes through the conceptual foundation she so delicately lays out.

The pressure of the press onto a matrix means the matrix, the press, and the receiving materials *touch* one another – a tactile characteristic that differentiates print from photography processes. In *Pressure* (12–39), the quintessential miraculous transfer, *Veronica's Veil* (14–16), is cleverly associated with the printmaking matrix and the press as agent that creates the image through contact (16). The act of printing thus becomes a blind act of creation in the interstices between matrix, material, and pressure. This embodied characterisation of the process of pressure is highlighted with Jennifer Robertson's rubbings of her deceased father's belongings, which Roberts addresses as prints existing as the world “as ‘seen’ by touch” (24). In the second chapter (40–69), the act of *reversal* is transformed from a mere ‘matter of fact’ for most printmakers to an intricate, arcane, and deeply conceptual feature of artmaking. Roberts proposes that the act of reversal generates a type of conversation between the materials and the artist – a collaboration reaching from the artist to involve the process, tools, and the press itself.

In *Separation* (70–101), Roberts reiterates that the art created is aware of the process needed to make them. She also starts to allude to the impact of deliberate ‘mistakes’ employed by pioneering artists in contemporary print such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg (94–98), revisited again in the following chapters on *Strain* and *Interference*. *Separation* discusses the technical process of colour separation in colour printing by tracing its intrinsic ties to the themes of segregation, disjuncture, and difference. The methodical, material, structural, and, ultimately, disjointed characteristics of colour separation in printmaking constitute some of the most important contributions concerning this technique in print *and* in this book: Firstly, processes in printmaking are visualised in three dimensions; secondly, prints constantly exist as incomplete or partial images of themselves dispersed in-between stages and processes, only to ‘come

together' upon the final printing; and thirdly, although the discipline exudes and is built on the foundation of planning and procedure, the outcome can never be entirely controlled. The artist and printer can never know precisely how the print will turn out, be re-assembled into, or reflect. In *Alienation* (166–193), the concepts of distance and delegation are key to Roberts' emphasis of contact, tactility, and the embodied acts in printmaking. The fundamental act of printing emerges here as a gesture that is obscured, distanced from the printer's hands by the 'alien' machine that is the press. The importance of control is reiterated: even if the printer has the skill and experience to expertly control the tools and presses in the studio, they still do not have direct control over how the image is printed.

Printmaking methods, characteristics, processes, and its' histories are delicately tied to topical themes and ideas of contemporary artists and their work. For example, *pressure* (Chapter 1) is conceptually developed further when Roberts explores the ties between physical characteristics of pressure and contemporary political negotiations of oppression, and the challenges of visually investigating the Black body in a historically western medium (27). Space is dedicated to the series of large-scale prints by Willie Cole titled *Five Beauties Rising* of 2012 (27–33). Here, Roberts stresses how process connects to theme – how this symbiosis truly enriches a print – and how the processes in printmaking hold the potential to meaningfully and deeply tie together the artist's ideas. Mark Bradford's *Pickett's Charge*, 2016–2017, towards the end of the third chapter, pulls together disparate themes and ideas, much like a colour print reaching its final culminating layer (99–101). Bradford's enormous archaeological installation of layered and peeled printed paper, in particular, marks a compelling convergence of the themes of dissolution, deconstruction, and disunity underpinning that work. *Reversal* connects the 'otherness' of reversal with critique, estrangement, and displace-

ment; this in turn paves the way for themes of dislocation, estrangements and the other, which features a poignant investigation of the work by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds in the critical context of settler colonialism (66–68).

Strain (102–131) turns its focus specifically to works related to screenprint and the stencil matrix. Roberts is at pains to re-introduce screening as an act of *straining* to distance the medium from screens and media. Strain also suggests contact, and fatigue – specifically the fatigue of process which can easily be overlooked. Despite a shared history rooted in industry, screenprinting today is more closely associated with industry than most other printing processes. This is where Andy Warhol's contribution not only in the medium, but the perception of the medium becomes clear. The chapter explores historical meanings carried by the screenprinting medium, the quality of straining, and processing, through the work of Warhol and other artists such as Ed Ruscha.

In *Strain* a series of "organic screenprints" by Ruscha titled *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, & Dews*, created in 1970, was "strained" into existence by using foodstuffs such as pie filling, chutney, and caviar to print (120). The use of these materials (instead of ink) to press through the mesh interrupted the usually smooth and even layer being deposited on the receiving material, which made the print partial, incomplete, and textured. Roberts' discussion here includes a page spread (122–123; figs. 4.15–4.16) that echoes the book's title page – on the left is a photograph of the exposed mesh, Ruscha in the process of printing *Stews* – on the right, the printed result of *Brews*. In the act of printing substances that have a colonial history like chutney, Ruscha reveals something about screenprinting and culture: "the image is made as much by what doesn't get through the screen as by what does" (125).

In *Alienation* Roberts takes up the concept of labour as her analytic prism. She considers the paradox of time and labour in the practice of printmaking by noting the discrepancy between

the labour poured into creating the work and the end result not necessarily reflecting that labour, especially in industry. She compares the history of commercial woodcut printing and contemporary artists' woodcut labours in an attempt to highlight the alienation of this kind of labour. In printmaking, "The artist cannot even witness the delegation of their own gesture" (168) – a view that is even more potent when compared with a medium such as painting, where the artist's gesture, their brush stroke, is undeniably tied to the mark left behind on canvas. In printmaking, the artist's process is broken up into a series of "artistic transfers" (168), and evidence of all these transfers rarely follow visually into the final print. As an artist and printmaker, I relate to these processes as acts of constant translation. From one step in the process to the next, the artist is continuously translating visceral experiences of process, inspirations, and moments in studio into mark-making – building up into a completed work.

Roberts notes and introduces the digital, drawing a connection between select topical discourse on the digital with the physical labour in printmaking. As a segue into contemporary print, the work of Christiane Baumgartner is discussed at length in *Alienation*. Baumgartner's enormous woodcut prints of video stills juxtapose one of the oldest forms of image reproduction technology with the most recent (179). Roberts expands on how Baumgartner resonates with an intermedial dialogue – the slowness of carving her enormous wood panels juxtaposed by the speed of her video still reference, moments in everyday life captured as a frame within a second of video footage (183). Baumgartner recognises the contemporary alienation of time experienced through technology, and the absurd imbalance of labour between the captured digital image and the artist's physical translation of that digital image into wood.

Roberts reads her critical ideas from unique techniques and visual effects associated with

print. *Interference* (132–165), explores the accidental organic effect of moiré, the interference pattern visible when halftone dots are layered in a series of prints, as evident in works by Rauschenberg. Moiré does not only occur in halftone layers in screenprinting; it has a history in pattern, printmaking, and fabric. When discussing Rauschenberg's use of moiré in his 1970 lithographic series titled *Stoned Moon*, Roberts notes the 'correct' or observed practice, pointing out to the reader the procedure and rules of printmaking, but also then how artists choose to creatively bend these rules. For Rauschenberg, these moiré patterns echo rocket smoke and the rippling of the surface of water (137). In covering the historical reception of moiré, Roberts notes a resemblance between the disdain for the moiré pattern in sixteenth-century printing and in twentieth-century technical literature on printing. The frequency of moiré doesn't stop here, as Roberts illustrates: manifestations of the pattern in digital media and its uses in the sciences cement the pattern's continued presence in images today. This is one of few striking instances where digital media and technology are read in continuity with printmaking processing. The space dedicated to moiré and its perceived inadequacies reiterates an important message that *Contact* seeks to deliver: the importance of understanding the histories of technique and process in the medium of print in order to understand the logics of print today.

All things considered, this book makes an incisive contribution to the significance of print and printmaking. Printmaking suffers from a form of "double invisibility" as the author aptly puts it in the introduction to the book (2). The medium "is somehow both too obscure and too familiar; both beyond and beneath notice" (2). Extensive and important literature on the techniques and history of printmaking lie outside of the nucleus of the art world, reserved in small recesses where mostly printmakers have opportunity to engage. The medium is complex and for

some reason this complexity, the intricate procedures and rules of the practice which shrouds it in unknown mystery, makes it difficult to engage with. Yet *Contact: Art and the Pull of Prints*' systematic presentation of printmaking throughout history and today sheds light on these often-invisible processes, contributing to how the printmaking process influences the artist's ideations. Each chapter draws you in, allowing you to fall in love with romantic descriptions of crucial moments of process.

One thing that I would've liked to see more of in Roberts' robust conceptual investigation of printmaking is identifying more how the digital has been incorporated and contributes to the analogue processes of printmaking. How technology and creative processing programs have been incorporated to contribute to the transferences the artist negotiates in the studio at different steps of printmaking processes. However, this line of investigation arguably warrants its own separate book – and Roberts does make her intention clear in distancing from digital media to focus more intimately on print and, most importantly, *contact*.

Roberts makes it her sustained goal to remind the reader of the power, the enchantment, and the far-reaching influence of printmaking. Most importantly, she reveals how this power of magic is harnessed by artists and printmakers – not only in making prints, but particularly in their practice; in the process of their creative research regardless of the medium they channel their making into. This book celebrates a medium that is far-reaching, that has impacted the way we share and look at images today, that is technical, rule-based, capricious, and mystical at the same time – in short, this is a work in praise of process.

LYRENE KÜHN-BOTMA is an artist and lecturer at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. She specialises in drawing, digital drawing and printmaking in her studio practice. In her practice, she is concerned with ideas of loss, process and artistic strain in acts of artmaking, specifically in the techniques of stone lithography and, by contrast, digital drawing.