

EXTENDED PRINT

AN OLD ART MADE ANEW

Maria Bonomi and *Regina Silveira*: two Brazilian artists, perspectives they open to art, society and the role of the museums.

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Print also has changed – from an intimate and delicate experience between the artist, the artwork and the beholder to a large mass enjoyment in open public spaces right in the middle of everyday life. Like any other art. The artist of print does not work alone anymore, nor does the beholder stands alone seeing a print, which does not fit in a museum and is not collectible, much less a multiple. The boundaries among the arts have dissolved, print has allowed itself the same liberties other art media have had for decades now. The way the public approaches the new print has also changed: labels and texts are irrelevant, even the curator is not on view. Print now is seen on the skin of a museum, not in its interior; it is again totally contemporary, even its aura is back. For decades, the art object prevailed, then it was the age of the museums and then, the curator's; now, considering print, the public is in the foreground.

Technology changes culture. Of course, what changes technology is culture – which means culture changes itself even if most people would like to believe that culture is what remains identical to itself, ever (this is a useful belief for cultural policy makers but not an evidence in the real world). In short, technology changes because culture changes although these changes are usually more visible when seen from the perspective of technology: changes seem more palatable that way, more neutral, more indisputable and more... irresistible. More desirable, even. Most people want technology to change and accept those changes easily, welcome them – but don't want culture to change. That seems to be the equation with which the human kind deals with one of its basic paradoxes.

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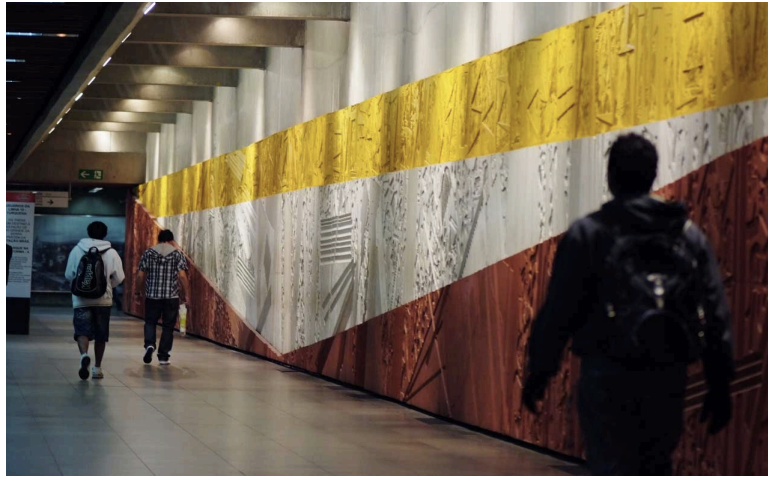
Changes come to art also, through technology. The idea of printing is directly associated to the way one obtains a copy on paper (or other material) from a matrix over which paint (in the old days) had been spread. The producer of the print – the artist—used to be personally involved in the process, manually involved in it. The hand was decisive, the same hand newly found in the walls of an Indonesian cave and that is now marveling the world; and with the hand, the entire body of the artist was involved: the personal rhythm was essential, just like the inspiring works of the French paleoanthropologist André Leroy Gourhan have shown.² The man or the woman, their hands, the material with which they worked, all that counted and were in an intimate relation. At the very least, that artist –let’s call him or her the traditional artist-- was supposed to first make a drawing so that a craftsman could eventually, if that was the case, transfer it to a matrix and then produce the corresponding engraving, if that was the artist’s choice.

But technology has changed, print has a much more enlarged meaning today and the artist does not even has to put his hands on the material in any of its manifestations – not to generate the original drawing, not to generate the matrix, nothing. There is now a distance between the artist and his work. Instead of *hands on*, a magic expression in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century for art education, now it is all about *hands off*. It has been like this for half a century now and it has been even more so since the computer became a widely used tool anyone could have in a private and individual office. From the hands to the mind, from matter to an idea: this double transfer has been a most meaningful one. Now, before arriving to the final and “hard” product in front of him or her, the whole preceding process is a virtual one, if not a conceptual one.

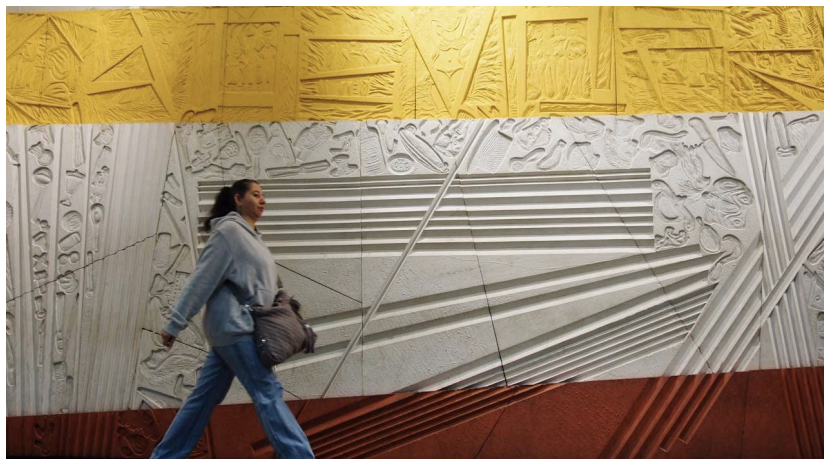
Let me show you how two very important Brazilian artists are dealing with the new technological possibilities for print and how meaningful have been these changes for the entire *system of art production* nowadays –and by that I mean the production of the artwork itself, properly speaking; its diffusion or distribution; the exchange stage (what and how much must one give back in order to get access to the artwork); and its use or consumption (or fruition, to put it in a higher level).

One of these artists is Maria Bonomi, a remarkable name in Brazilian printing, widely known outside Brazil as well. Born in Italy in 1935, but in Brazil since she was 11, Maria has dedicated herself completely to printing. Her works are everywhere and widely acclaimed. Let’s see some of her “prints as public art”:

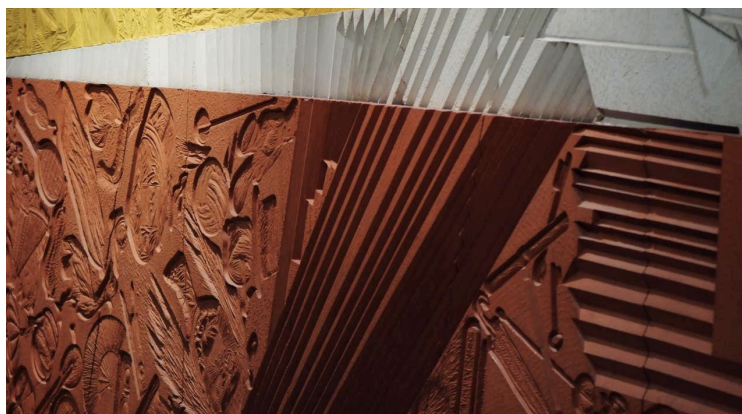
² *L’homme et la matière*. (Paris, Albin Michel, 1943); *Le geste et la parole* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1964-65).



This is a wall in one of São Paulo subway's station, from 2005. Let's take a closer look at it, from a different angle:



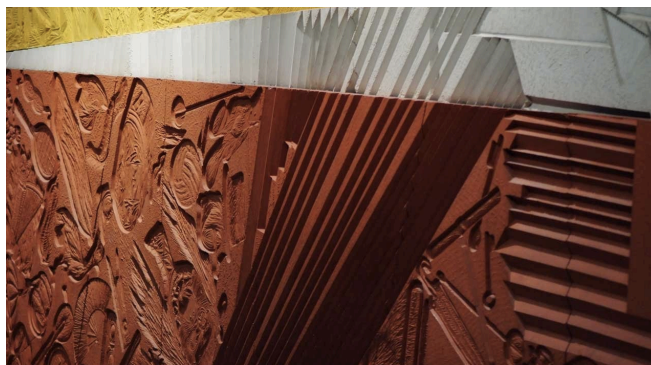
or in this image:



This looks like a true print, an engraving. Its truth, like in a traditional print, lies in the carving, its truth can be found inside its traces, its traits, its furrows, its scores. The artist is in each one of these carvings. In front of this image



we feel like if we were in front of a print on paper that has come out of an engraving. In this image however



we see the engraving in 3-D, so to speak: it looks like a matrix, a piece of wood for instance from which some parts have been removed; but now, instead of wood there is a concrete wall, cement. This is a true extended or amplified engraving. With a physical sensuality that does not exist in the paper format (in traditional printing, the sensuality would eventually be in the paper, would be fit when the hand of the beholder touched the paper; on the wall, the sensuality is in the work itself, in the “printing”).

When one compares these extended prints by Maria to some of her “true” prints like these



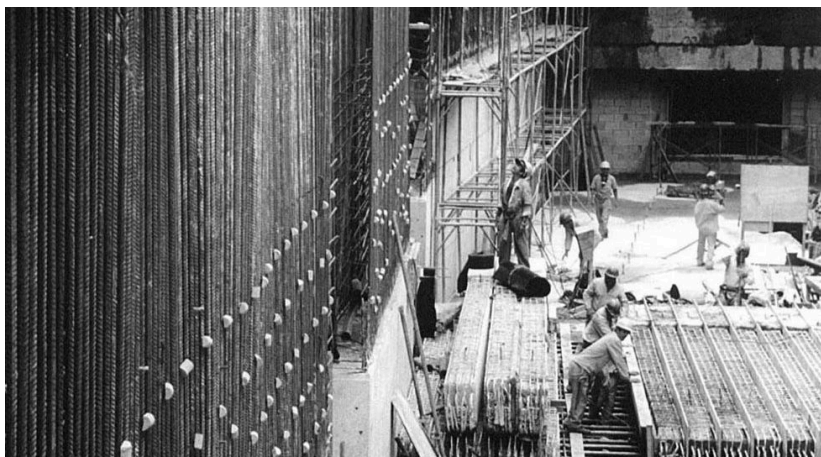
Buggy, xylography 105 x 85 cm, 1985



Ways into yourbody
xylography, 100 x 210 cm, 1975

one is immediately aware that they do share the same nature with their subway station sister and that they come from the same imaginary.

And this is how Maria's "matrix" looked like when it was been prepared or built in that subway station:



What strike us most are not only the size of it but also the number of people working on it. There is not one artist only (and lonely) anymore – and actually Maria herself does not show in the picture: there are dozens of workers preparing Maria's artwork. Can we call them artists? They are, at least, craftsmen: the printers. The truth is the artist is not alone anymore, she is not one, she is dozens. This reminds me one of Walt Whitman's lines taken from one of his Modern poems: *I am large, I contain multitudes*. When Whitman wrote that line he had in mind a very specific situation: he was asking himself whether he contradicted himself: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." The difference between himself and a contemporary artist is that the contemporary artist does not need to contradict herself in order to contain multitudes in herself: the contemporary artist is large, she contains multitudes. The contemporary artist needs multitudes in order to have her work done – unless she is happy within the limits of her old medium frontiers, a territory which she could occupy herself alone with her small piece of wood to be carved, her print and her rather small piece of paper. That old territory is alright and it has its place in today's art world, of course. But if this artist wants to dialogue with the new reality, she must contain multitudes, she must be able to contain multitudes. In a way, a contemporary artist like Maria goes back to the 16th century in Western tradition when an artist needed also a small platoon of assistants in order to have his work done: if he was a painter, he would eventually need a specialist in ears, another specialist in hands, another one to prepare his canvas, his colors.... This is what we call a revolution, a re-volution, a going back to a certain point in the past. Technologies also allow for revolutions, for "going back": after a time when the reality of art was translated by the image of the artist alone in his studio or in front of his canvas placed outdoor, the artist is again back to the plant, to the factory – Andy Warhol was right when he called his studio a factory, and so is Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons and many others...

Maria does not contain multitudes in herself when she makes art only, she also contains multitudes seeing her art because what she does is public art for multitudes, like in that subway station in São Paulo, used daily by multitudes. She also does another kind of public art, like this one in a private house in Manaus, the capital of Amazon:



Let's take a look now at another Brazilian artist, Regina Silveira, born in 1939, another woman artist (the women artist are very important in Brazil at last, and some of them are highly priced in the international art market, should that be a way of evaluating their art:



This work, *Stampede*, was installed on the façade of the Biennial building in São Paulo during its XXIV edition, in 1998. What you see here are prints of different animal's paws.

These two images below are from another site specific installation, this time at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2006, for the VI Taipei Biennial, and it's called *Irruption*. What you see is a multitude of human feet:





The human imprint, like those pre-historical paintings in the walls of the Indonesian cave or the French caves, is back again, forceful, powerful.

Below, *Rerum Naturae* (*Things of Nature*; the table with pottery) over *Mundus Admirabilis* on the floor and background (*Wonderful World*), 2010, an installation mixing two different artworks by Regina at the *Philagraphika 2010* exhibition (Moore College of Art and Science, Philadelphia, USA):



Next, *Lumen*, 2005, at the Cristal Palace, Reina Sofia Art Museum, Madrid:



Like in Maria's case, when one compares these extended prints by Regina with some of her "true" prints one knows at once all of them came from the same imaginary and share the same formal nature:



Hammock hook (The Eclipse Series), 2003. Inkjet print on backlight, 73x53 cm.

And the following one is the work Regina did for my museum, MASP-São Paulo Art Museum, and which I had the chance to curate: *Thread in Blue*, 2010, like the previous ones a digital print on adhesive vinyl, occupying 2.300 square meters on all four façades of the building:





If we look closely at it, we'll see it is rather different from Maria's work:



There is no sensation of a 3-D here, there are no visible traces, no traits, no carving, no furrows: the image is flat and it shows on a flat surface: the image is printed like on paper, it is just not a paper anymore but a piece of vinyl. It is a printing machine that produces this art, just like in the old days, but this machine is now a modern ink jet printer: there is no “weighting on the paper, the paper does not pass under a heavy cylinder to have the image imprinted on it, the image is obtained the way a image on a paper in the newspaper is obtained, so to speak. But contrary to what happened before, or what happens with the newspaper today, this image does not come out in one single and whole piece: as one can see in the photo, it comes in a number of different slices, hundreds of them. Again, a significant number of workers are required to put this piece together: at least two or three digital programmers, a number of workers at the printing bureau and, as one can see in the photo, what is needed now are specialists in rappel, those people that hang themselves over the abyss, climbing up and down cliffs or building façades. The image is first sketched or loosely drawn by the artist, then introduced in a computer that will “treat” it digitally and transform it in a number of different matrices, then these matrices are enlarged, then they go to the printer who will have a very difficult problem adjusting everything, then the professionals of the rappel will be hired to install the artwork in the façade of the museum after the transit authorities have altered the traffic around the museum in order to avoid any possible accident... There is just a very small analogy between this extended print and the traditional print of which this very same museum has a large stock in its gallery and storage rooms.



A view of *Thread in blue* on the back façade of MASP (taken from an helicopter).

Again, both Maria's and Regina's work share another characteristic: they are unique works, not multiples, they cannot be reproduced. They are absolutely rare, a one-time-only event: they cannot be transported, removed, sold, they are unique just like a canvas by Tiziano or Da Vinci. Their *aura*, in the way Walter Benjamin described it in his "The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)³, does exist, it is there – and like in a true auratic work, people have to go where they are if they want to see it. This is one of the most important aspect of the relation between the body of a work of art and the body of the beholder: to move the body to where the art is. With a rather important difference in the case of Regina's work: it exists for a short period of time only and then it disappears; if you saw it, you saw; if you don't, you won't...

And the museum will not be able to store Regina's artwork, nor Maria's, an art not to be stored, an art that actually, in Regina's case, will be destroyed in the process of removing it from the façade (Maria's will live longer). This work by Regina on MASP's façades is made to be destroyed, its end is inscribed in its birth, in its DNA and is totally predictable– just like for us, humans. It will survive in documents and in the memory of those who saw it there. All that is left is a digital archive with the instructions for reinstalling it if that ever happens (most probably, it won't...)

This is a totally new approach to print, to art, to graphic art, to public art, to the way people see art, to art's destiny, to the way art is collected (is this a collectible

³ Published by Schocken/Random House, edited by Hannah Arendt.

art, anyway?), to the way a museum must deal with this art – to the role of the museum itself. Art made for public spaces has always existed, for sure. Trajan's Arch cannot be removed or stored or sold and collected, nor can the obelisk at the center of the Place de la Concorde in Paris. But for print, or for the *graphs* as Regina calls them, it is a great move. The "old" print forms and formats will not disappear, the "old" format is also a contemporary one. But a new reality has emerged. We have been talking about mass society, mass communication, mass media, mass art for quite some time now. The mass reality is finally installed right among us. When the installation of Regina's work was finally completed (it took almost four weeks just to install it on the façades, not to mention the months in the preparation of the material in different professional studios) the entire city was transformed in its relation to this museum – and to this artist. One could see Regina's work from afar. People would stop in the side walk and marvel at what they were seeing, just like they did underground in front of Maria's work. The relation between the audience and the artwork is a totally new one. Astonishment may be the right word to describe the new scenario, a word that maybe has never been applied to print's old format. It is not a better relation or a worse one: it is just different, contemporary. Before, the artwork was in our hands, it was fragile, we would dominate it at least physically. Today, the artwork is huge, we are fragile in front of it, we don't control it anymore, not even physically. This is already a new trend. It is not the dominant format, the dominant art yet, but it is the emerging one, no doubt. What remains to be understood is which format is now the residual one... There is a new representation of art in its relation to life and the world, one that reminds us this Jorge Luis Borges' short story⁴ in which a cartographer wishes to draw a map so perfect that it comes out the actual real size of the real territory it is mapping... Regina's skies were almost true skies, they worked like that.

Fact is the entire *system of art production*, in this case of print production or graphic production, is being changed: production has changed (we saw the preparation for Maria's wall in the subway station and we saw the rappelists at work for Regina); the diffusion, the distribution of the work to the public (the exposure of the work to the public) occurs in a new context and situation; the exchange phase is transformed (in Brazil just like in a number of other Western countries, people willing to see art inside a museum have to pay for a ticket before entering; this new public art is for free); and the use or fruition of the art is also beyond old systems of communication with the public and of "education of the public", if one can say so (labels have no place here, there is no introductory text by a curator presenting the work, there is hardly any need for a catalogue – which anyway would show very little of what is actually seen when one is in front of the art itself; this art is to be experienced directly, in a corps-à-corps, body-to-body contact).

⁴ First published under the title "On Rigor in Science" in the March 1946 edition of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, año 1, n. 3, as part of a piece called (in a very appropriate way for this paper) "Museo" ("Museum"); now it is found in the volume of collected short stories *El Hacedor* (The one who makes).

Extended printing with unexpected new materials for “printing” –concrete, cement, adhesive vinyl -- means extended audience, extended art, extended public art, extended art experience, extended cities, extended worlds – and extended questions submitted to the museums. Can they reply to what is been presented to them? Do they have to? Museums are still strong points of attraction and they are needed but this new kind of art –which is not a specialty of printing and which is not just big— poses problems that at least we in Brazil are not addressing fast enough and clearly enough... Museums should not be for residual art or for the dominant art only –m or should they? Can they cope with the emerging art? Can they be creative in a way it has never been necessary before?

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São Paulo, October 2014