The Emergence of Reprographic Art?¹
Philippe Boissonnet
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As I, newly arrived from France, was going for a walk in Montreal, I discovered the Motivation V gallery and its Xerographic Research Center: just one Xerox copier, expensive to rent, and fragile technology..., but ample means of stimulating curiosity and encouraging experimentation. A stationary or moving model: an image, an object, the body, or even light...three color selections, a few seconds, and conception becomes production of the image. A disconcerting, even disappointing ease, some would say. I was unwilling to stop at such radically simple statements and preferred to investigate this new artistic practice in order to better reveal its qualities or weak points, its similarities and differences with other multi-copy reproduction techniques.

Recently Montreal gave the public two important and simultaneous exhibitions (November 1981). These were called, respectively: International Copy-Art Exhibition (Motivation V gallery) and Reproduction-Art Exhibition (Powerhouse gallery). As the first of their kind in Quebec, they demonstrated the growing interest aroused by this new union between Art and Technology. As a matter of fact, the use of these photocopying machines has been in existence for almost 20 years, but it has only been for a few years that solitary experimenters have got together and organized collective exhibitions: San Francisco, New York, Toronto², Montreal...but also in Europe.

Reprographic Art - Copy Art - Reproduction Art - Xerographic Art. There are already four different terms all denoting the same artistic phenomenon. Is it indeed possible to truly speak about a phenomenon or an art form when people know very little about what it entails? There is no lack of controversies on this subject. The debate is heated and reprographic art has not yet achieved ratification. Its definition is still blurred. It does, however, seem that reprographic art has outgrown the experimental stage and gone on to deeper exploration. Different techniques have already been differentiated and the avant-garde network is expanding. In actual fact, not only artists but also galleries, art critics and even collectors are paying it some interest. A copy market is trying to develop and already museums such as the New York Metropolitan Museum have bought xerographic works.

Are we observing the emergence of reprographic art? My proposals will only serve to expound a series of questions to which I cannot give an answer with certainty, but they will serve as the beginning of an analysis. What is reprography? What are its affiliations with engraving, photography, and photomechanical techniques? Will it meet the same difficulties in entering the
field of art as its predecessors? Will it be necessary to revise the concept of printing in general and the status of the original print in particular, in light of the electrophotographic techniques? What does the Quebec Engraving Council think about this?...

I shall ask as many questions as are necessary before coming to a decision on the future of reprographic art. It will certainly have difficulties acquiring an identity, situated as it is at the crossroads of numerous processes. Certain artists have already combined copies with media as diverse as painting, sketching, sculpture, ceramics, printing, photography, animated films, conceptual art, book editing and even video. The horizons are wide and open. Reprographic art is putting itself on display as a multidisciplinary form of creation.

The Encyclopaedia Larousse defines reprography as "all techniques which allow reproduction of an original document through copy or duplication, on ordinary or special paper." Specialists make a technical distinction between reproduction through duplication or copying: "duplication consists of creating a model (block, plate or stencil) from which the desired number of copies will be made through methods similar to those used in printing." This category indeed makes no changes as far as the principle of contact between paper and ink, peculiar to printing, is concerned.

Reprographic art is more interested in reproduction through copying, including various processes such as photocopy, diazocopy, thermocopy and above all electrophotography (with Xerox, 3-M, canon or Kodak machines). This latter process is quite revolutionary compared to traditional processes, due to its instantaneousness and its ability to print in the absence of contact and at a distance (depending on the photoconductors' properties).

Electrostatic machines are lightweight, easy to handle and maneuver. They do not require a workshop with special equipment. Their principal limitations stem from having a purely functional objective and not being adapted for artistic needs: their over-automation sometimes prohibits manipulation of the color selector; their office-paper format; and the quality of the paper (although the Xerox process has the advantage of accepting any type of paper, from the point when it passes into the rollers).

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It could be feared, it is true, that creativity in reprography could be too rapidly systematized into a fixed repertoire. For the range of possibilities to be expanded, the technique has to adapt itself to what is needed. It is most difficult to convince companies and engineers of the interest artists have in machines which were previously conceived to reproduce a document through the touch of a button. This aspect of the art of duplication may seem
unprepossessing, but it is this same aspect that may make up the
definition of reprography.

Copying and its 'push-button' ease find themselves faced with
prejudices which must be even worse than those confronting
photography a century earlier, with its click of the shutter.
Photography was immediately embraced by the sciences, exploited and
subjugated by the mass media; the concept of reprography, on the
other hand, was already destined for this use before its birth.
But the contemporary mind is somewhat indifferent to these
incongruous marriages between art and science, and the prejudices
tend to fade away. We are only a little surprised, but not
shocked. Besides, reprography is not as earth-shattering a
discovery as photography. Finally (without going into technical
details), it is merely the technological product of photography,
printing and electrostatic properties.

This 'trans-disciplinarity', so characteristic of modern-day
art, is without doubt one of reprography's strong points. Will
this allow reprography to stand out or, conversely, does this run
the risk of drowning reprography in the multitude of contemporary
practices? There is no proof that, with each new technological
discovery and with each recovery of the tool, one branch of
artistic activity should automatically join the ranks,
distinguisihing itself from the others by its innovative aspect, be
it formal or conceptual. Naturally, the material characteristics
of the copies are very specific and, as a result, they form a group
of works which differ from the images produced by computers, video,
photography or holography.... But from a formal viewpoint, these
different kinds of images are sometimes little more than
retranscriptions of already-existing elements of representation.
On the other hand, chromatic aberrations are peculiar to the
technique and even to the kind of machine used. Nor is the
aesthetic concept completely new: industrial objects, in series,
presented and signed like a work of art, already exist. In spite
of this, it is this aspect which I find remarkable, with the
principle of duplication as an artistic practice.

THE DEVALUATION LINKED TO THE IDEA OF THE MULTIPLE DOES
NOT ORIGINATE FROM REPROGRAPHY: ENGRAVING, FOLLOWED BY
PHOTOGRAPHY ALREADY INTRODUCED SUCH CRISSES IN ART.

The multiple and the belittling view of the copy attached to
it have not ceased to worry people, always seeking the authenticity
of works of art. Ever since the first multiple copies, that is,
since the development of

Born in 1938, Barrow comes from the first generation of
artists using reprographic techniques in image production. 
Formerly at the George Eastman House in Rochester, he is 
currently a professor at the University of New Mexico at
Albuquerque.

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engraving during the Renaissance, this distrust of them existed, even if at that time there was a greater tendency to encourage imitations of the works of the great masters. Engraving was immediately deprecated in relation to painting, being relegated to an utilitarian and mercantile role. As the first means of reproduction and mass communication, engraving allowed artists such as Mantegna or Raphaël to increase their fame and incomes. Here it is already possible to easily distinguish those functions suited to modern duplication processes (besides which they are their sole condition for existence): information, conservation, the document as evidence and cultural memory.

So the following example well illustrates the indisputable archeological value of every kind of reproduction:

"In his Storia dell'iconografia anatomica published in 1957, Loris Permuda reproduced a plate from Leopoldo Caldani's Icones anatomicae (1801) in photogravure, drawn and engraved by Gaetano Bosa. It contains an Apollon du Belvédère (Apollo of Belvedere) inspired by a graphic reconstruction of this well-known marble which itself is only a late Roman replica of a Greek bronze."²³

From copy to copy, it is thus possible to retrace the complete genealogy of the same model through the ages, and to better understand this role of spreading and perpetuating knowledge.

In the industrial age, engraving was to an even greater extent subject to the needs of information. Prior to the invention of photography, engraving was the most effective means of propaganda. Photography, in addition, freed engraving from its exacting duties and made way for that which was called, at the end of the nineteenth century, the revival of the original print.

Photography replaced engraving to advantage thanks to its qualities of so-called objective rendering of reality, especially since the perfection of photogravure and other printing techniques. Photography became an original artistic means of creation and the engraver even had the choice of printing his work as an unique copy. Making art accessible to a greater clientele, a distinction should nonetheless be made between engraving and the stream of commercial reproductions, not only by its particular plastic qualities, but above all by the establishment of a distribution system with a limited number of printings, having the artist's signature on each copy. Their share of the art market is dependent on this. It is, among other things, the adoption of this system that helped photography succeed in making the most of its qualities as a tool in the service of artistic creation; some photographers,
rather than destroy the negative, commit themselves contractually with the buyer to preserve it in a deeply refrigerated chamber, so that the exact replica of the work could be reproduced in such a case as the color quality changing too quickly. Besides, photography managed to make itself accepted as an element in the elaboration of an engraving thanks to such techniques as silk screen

Connie Fox, Tools, 1978. This image represents the direct imaging technique, used by artists in the reproduction of images in two and three dimensions. Born in Colorado, Fox lives in East Hampton, New York.

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printing and offset lithography. But it must be said that the latter encountered a great deal of resistance, concerning the automatic intervention of the mechanism. It appears that photography will have to bear the heavy duty of reproducing nature for a long time, cheerfully passed on by painting and engraving at the beginning of the century.

This subtle reminder shows that reprography has no choice but to put up with this heritage (or curse). But the evolution of conceptions of art must be taken into account; today, this is progressing almost as quickly as the evolution of modern techniques. The recent example of the Art and Feminism exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Modern Art proves that reprographic art is already acceding to a certain artistic recognition, as xerographic works have been exhibited for the same reason as a photograph, engraving, sketch or painting.

COPY OR ORIGINAL? THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE WORK ALWAYS HAS AUTHORITY.

Copy art has come to underline an immense contemporary phenomenon. Industrial society is steeped in reproductions of works of art, in the press, advertising and other multiple images which in no way lay claim to artistic originality. Duplicates, copies, imitations and forgeries are a part of our daily visual horizon. Man is so swamped in all kinds of facsimiles that he sometimes forgets what an original is, all the while being devoted to it. We are constantly in need of differentiating real from fake, natural from artificial, made-by-hand from industrially-produced. Clearly authenticity always has authority, even if only the artist's authenticity, continuing to show his uniqueness by means of his signature.

Man keeps up an ambiguous relationship with the concept of the copy. At once attraction and rejection. Fascination? The pleasure of imitating, forging, reproducing and multiplying is perhaps not without metaphorical links with the reproduction of
living organisms and with the secret desire of one day being able to create one's own double. Holography will shortly succeed in giving us the perfect illusion of this and genetic engineering has already produced identical replicas of the same mouse embryo. Disquiet? Perhaps because of the fear of losing one's own identity confronted with the crowds and anonymity of large urban concentrations. Mr. X, individual or copy?

Certainly the analysis, while it should not remain at this primary stage, is, however, sufficient to discern the context of the problematic in which reprographic art finds itself.

The supreme irony of copy art is its quite paradoxical name that grates on the mind. The intelligence has a hard time picturing art, symbol of creative originality and of the uniqueness of the work, collaborating with vulgar copies originating from an office machine. Reprography's undertaking would thus be taking part in a desire to desecrate art?

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Helen Wallis, Gertrude Stein Series #1, 1976. Although many artists use the copier quite simply to copy, others, such as Joan Lyons, Helen Wallis and Evergon (Al Lunt), use it to produce photomontages and very specific, fantastic images.

This may in effect be the consequence of the popularization of such a means of artistic creation, which risks, however, shutting itself up in a sort of ghetto for [?] minor art, besides. In reality, as everyone knows, the medium is not in itself ideological[?] and depends on the person using it.

REPROGRAPHY, A TECHNIQUE DISTINCT FROM PHOTOGRAPHY AND ENGRAVING, MUST DEFINE ITS OWN STATUS.

The impressions I managed to gather from the people in charge of the Motivation V gallery reflect the current uncertainty about the potential status of reprographic art. Hope and relentlessness confront collectors' doubts. The copy market is just being born, and the Montreal clientele does not want to take any risks. The inevitable questions: "Will it keep over time? What will the paper and color be like in ten years?" Answers are difficult to find because the technique is so new. As for the market value of the print, it depends on who signs it. At any rate, the artists are confident and wait patiently; the favorable response from art critics proves that they are right.

Reprographic artists could be divided, very crudely, into three categories according to the manner in which the medium is considered:

a) The copy as sole final product, using only the machine's
printing abilities. The work can be unique due to the impossibility of repeating the gesture or assembly, like a painting, or following the logic of its original principle, presenting itself in the form of a multiple with a limited, numbered printing, like an engraving.

b) The copy as component of a multi-media practice, where the trace of the human hand can often still be seen. This is generally produced as an unique work. But it is no longer possible, then, to speak of a reprographic work, as the piece stands out through other techniques.

c) A third dimension could be the use some artists made of it by totally exploiting its reproductive and printing purposes: creating and circulating books and magazines, either concerning their own work, or as a limited-production edition. In this way, a new outlet opens up for artists wanting to be their own printer, editor and even distributor.

As has already been mentioned, reprography is a multi-disciplinary process, but one constant element always emerges: printing. As such, one should then ask oneself what position reprography occupies in relation to engraving, and how the Quebec Engraving Council sees it. Although the Council completely supported the Montreal Xerographic Center in continuing to rent the Xerox machine and obtaining subsidies, it puts up a few restrictions to its recognition as an original print. The Council accepts reprography as a new creative tool in the artist's hands, capable of intervening, if need be, in the elaboration of a print in the same way as a photograph, but not as a completely separate medium because it does not satisfy the minimal conditions necessary to a printing technique for it to correspond to the definitions specified by


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this same Council. Their terms follow:

Original Prints:
- The artist is the conceiver/producer of the printing element (mold).
- The image is conceived and elaborated in such a way as to exploit the particular characteristics of each engraving technique, and may not be the reproduction of a sketch, watercolor, gouache or painting.
- The engraving is printed off by the artist or under his direction and must be approved by him.

Interpretational Prints are engravings whose printing elements have been produced by an engraving artist from a work created with the use of another medium.
Reproduction Prints are simply photomechanical duplications of images created with the aid of another medium without there being any interpretation.

Evidently the copy does not fit into this grid. It, in effect, either corresponds to the three definitions at once, or is completely ruled out.

An interpretational print because the machine more or less interprets the colors and forms according to the settings chosen by the operator. This interpretation becomes a true original creation when the model is entirely conceived of by the artist and the copy is produced as a result of the collaboration of machine and artist, dependent on the chromatic and photokinetic qualities particular to this technique. However, the procedure used could make people think that it is a simple reproduction. But here again reprography does not find a place in the grid, as we are no longer concerned with a photomechanical, but an electrographic method. Of course it could be said that the method is of little importance since the result is approximately the same when the copy is the reproduction of an image or object with little or without any intervention from the artist. The question becomes delicate, with subtle shades of meaning. In a montage/collage, multiplication and repetition can therefore become a creative schema, especially because a very wide variety of copies can be produced from the same model. Moreover, when reprographic art is executed on any other medium than paper, this process is almost completely forgotten. The image could just as well originate from a totally different printing method.

These few observations on the subject of possible reprographs show well that the book should not be judged by the cover: reprography is not an engraving technique, or otherwise its definition has to be revised. The use of reprography according to the distribution method and the characteristics particular to engraving only represents one of its facets and should not prevent it from defining its own status. Not to forget that reprography is above all a multidisciplinary art form. Copies with multiple faces are surely the very essence of its means of expression. The copy is something different, but this something different poses problems and we are unsure whether we should open the gates of the temple of Art to it. Reprography is a hybrid term, carrying the mark of its ancestors and at the same time seeking to distinguish itself from them. The fact that it has been able to cross the threshold of some museums does not prove that it has completely succeeded, but quite simply that it has followed the path beaten by the other arts of multiples. Therein lies all the ambiguity of reprographic art.


1. I shall use the term reprographic art which is most accommodating as far as utilizable techniques are concerned and conveys the links with photographic techniques and their derivatives well. But, on the other
hand, I would like to note that the term *copy art* has a greater semantic impact, given the somewhat provocative juxtaposition of the words *art* and *copy*.


Translation: Julie Y. Nye
49 Portland Street, Apt. 5
Yarmouth, ME 04096-1678
(207) 846-3302