

AURA OF PRACTICE AS MATRIX: BEYOND THE EXPANDED FIELD FROM ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES TO COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

Anders Aarvik

This paper seeks to explore the transmedial attributes of printmaking revealed through theory retrieved from the field of major mediums such as painting and sculpture and applied with a focus on the key concepts of the artist's *practice* as the printmaking *matrix* with the attempt to move *beyond the expanded field*. The *matrix* is the mould used to cast an image, such as the copper plate, woodblock, or lithography stone, but is also considered a *trace carrier* in more conceptual terms¹. Due to the expanding heterogeneous term of *printmaking*, this article is limited to what can be considered analogue or hard copy printmaking (e.g., intaglio, relief, lithography), as well as its collective tools and materials (e.g., inks, plates, roller, press, acid) which can be found in a printmaking studio. The notion of *aura* is drawn from the German philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin's concept². However, it is used in a dialectical sense to accentuate the immaterial dimension of the artist's practice which correlates with(in) the *matrix*.

THE REVITALISATION OF PRINTMAKING

Traditional crafts like printmaking, painting, and sculpture seem to undergo revitalisation inferior to reappearance in a regular pattern. In contemporary art which is driven by globalisation, bio- and geopolitics, and technology, painting has had its concluding revitalisation by writers, artists, and art critics upon works, papers, and talks such as art theorist and critic Jan Verwoert's article *Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they think it is a good idea*⁴, and painting is again perceived as a relevant medium. It has been undergoing a collective examination with canvases still being turned around, laid on the ground, cracked open, and infused with a myriad of ingredients and remedies; the painting can be regarded as a tried and tested medium. Sculpture is often perceived in the light of *the expanded field* after the influential essay by the American art theorist Rosalind Krauss, which opened the definition of sculpture for modifications⁵.

Crossing boundaries and norms connected to a medium has been central in contemporary art for decades. Printmaking has been a misunderstood medium and addressed as the other in several contexts, noticeable in the article *Print as other, the future is queer*⁶, by the artist and educator Richard Harding, locating printmaking's current position within contemporary art practices using the socio-political notion of otherness compared to the major medium of painting, or as in this article, *the painting normative culture*. Printmaking is '[...] an ongoing construct that morphs into something else just when you think you have the answer'⁷. Several institutions have been shutting down their printmaking laboratories due to irrelevance, that are now rising again. This article explores the revitalisation of printmaking in contemporary and conceptual spaces, by applied theory known from major mediums, and delves into the artist's efforts in challenging the printmaking medium, its comprehensive process, and ways of assessing the object of printmaking through the artist's *practice* correlating with(in) the *matrix*.

As we will see through the examples of Fleckner, Morey, and Kalvebodløbet, contemporary artists and entities are experimenting with key concepts of their practice in conjunction with the unpredictable and comprehensive process of printmaking. The medium is undergoing a revival, and it is underlined by institutions, workshops, and artists showing significant interest as well as funding within contemporary arts, with a counting number of artists collaborating and challenging the medium and its process. There are several reasons for this, including:

- The mass-produced art object is a counter-culture. Publications, editions of various sorts, and especially zines are home-producible and can respond with an intimate and personal encounter when turning the pages, infused with informality while making it possible to acquire the object at an affordable price⁸.
- The comprehensive process of navigating the printmaking studio. The studio forces artists

¹ Bednarczyk, A., Pelzer-Montada, R. (Ed.). (2018). *The shape of graphic art – Perspectives on contemporary printmaking: Critical writing since 1986*. Manchester University Press. "We can speak of a mathematical matrix, a genetic matrix, a sound matrix, an algorithmic matrix, a mold matrix, a graphic matrix, and others. The identity of the matrix is revealed by three factors. These are the function of the trace carrier, the function of the intermediate form, and the automatism of marking. Everything that has the features indispensable for potential marking in the receiving area can be the medium of the trace. The material from which the matrix is made is negligible, as long as its structure permits making an impression. Moreover, the matrix does not have to be material; it may be a mathematical or conceptual structure."

² Benjamin, W. (2008). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (J. A. Underwood, Trans.). Penguin Books.

³ Humphries, C. *Aura and the Dialectics of Printmaking*, RMIT University, 2010.

⁴ Verwoert, Jan. *Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea*, Afterall, 2010.

⁵ Krauss, Rosalind. *Sculpture in the expanded field*, October, 1979.

⁶ Harding, R. *Print as other: the future is queer*. IMPACT 7, 2013

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Arnold, Chloe. 'Brief History of Zines', Mental Floss, website accessed 20 March, 2019, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/88911/brief-history-zines>.

to respond to the unpredictable and long-lasting sequences in the printmaking process with varying degrees of complexity depending on the type of printmaking⁹. These sequences can be disrupted and abused conceptually as we will see with Fleckner, Morey, and Kalvebodløbet.

- The line between traditional mediums and conceptual practices becoming increasingly blurry. If an artist focuses on object-making, which was earlier seen as a more or less formalist action, this can be perceived as a conceptual action regarding the process, performance, and the object in itself, with philosophies and movements exploring new and necessary ways of perceiving objects. Organically-occurred (that happens outside the will of the human) objects and human-produced objects, also categorised as non-human-, more-than-human (with more alterations of similar notions), and human entities. This is amongst others due to the increasing focus on the symbiotic and hybrid relationship between things; humans and their surroundings, and surroundings and things with other things (e.g., bacteria, air particles, light, ocean, a water buffalo and its oxpecker and its parasites), which challenges the idea of physicality, weighting physical mass similarly with metaphysical (sensual) mass¹⁰.
- The plurality of medium as a concept in *the expanded field*. The post-medium condition, with artists and theorists no longer being occupied with what artists are making. There is a self-contradictory aspect to this due to the assessment of matter disregarding the most obvious physical qualities, which motivates the audience to engage with matter from its more underlying metaphorical characteristics, the heterogeneous and pluralised aspects of the medium. If the medium goes beyond itself, it really *is*¹¹.

The course towards post-conceptualism, which the British philosopher and theorist Peter Osborne suggests as our current period in contemporary art¹², pedagogically clarifies the perspectives we address today in a historical context, although this is a constant subject for critical debate that shifts rapidly in the field. However, it clarifies that conceptual art, in the 1960s, went from a more or less formalist basis to artists starting to embed their ideas and critique into the artwork itself. The artists and critics were studying ready-made objects and got interested in questions of value. What is it we are looking at, why does it have value, what is the value, and how can we embed these into the work itself? In many ways, this was a question about transparency; of the work's conceptual and critical character, but the conceptual artists also realised they hit a wall. If the conceptual qualities were underlined by the product, what was left to discuss? The conceptual qualities addressed at the time became a tool of criticality, gave importance to the political mechanisms of art, and addressed what material is capable of today. In the end, Osborne states that "[...] post-conceptual art is not the name for a particular type of art so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general [...]" in which he focuses on the social relations and general mechanisms that make contemporary art possible as a general condition. This remark on the main points for printmaking's revitalisation as well as the note on the recent historical development

⁹ Smith, Alan, *Etching: A Guide to Traditional Techniques*, Crowood Press, 2004

¹⁰ Harman, Graham, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, Pelican Books, 2018

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames Hudson, 1999.

¹² Osborne, Peter, *Contemporary art is post-conceptual art*, Public Lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2010.

of conceptual art and engagement leads us to the key notions of this article, namely *beyond the expanded field* and the *merge of practice as matrix*.

BEYOND THE EXPANDED FIELD

The expanded field is a crucial reference within the discourses of contemporary art, and a part of our historical consciousness, coined by Rosalind Krauss in her essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, later the same theorist coining our position of the *post-medium condition*. In the essay *Defining Sculpture: beyond the expanded field*, by the German sculptor Robert Huber, the author tries to combine the ideas of Krauss, which at the time is medium-centric, however emphasises that; *'postmodernist practice is no longer organised around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organised instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation'* and presents the diagram of *non-landscape - non-architecture - sculpture*, and compares it with the highly conceptual social sculpture by Joseph Beuys who perceives society as a sculpture in its whole and its citizens as sculptural material, and further combines two arguments by art theorist and critic Jan Verwoert who claims that perception- theoretical analysis has most probably reached its limits and that there can be other perspectives, such as practice, to consider sculpture as an artistic discipline. Art critic Nikolaus Hirsch claims that any categorisation, like *sculpture* or *printmaking*, should not be perceived as limitations to overcome, but used for constructive and productive discussion.

From the analysis of these arguments and events, Huber concludes that we should define the term sculpture in *the expanded field* based on a few parameters; it must respond to *space* (e.g., social, material, psychological, virtual) and it should be defined not from the result with the legacy in the statuette, but by the artist *practice*¹³. If the *practice* and interaction of their *practice* with the material are concerned with the conceptual and spatial engagement and versatile understanding of sculptural objects today, it must be possible to address a sculpture and its sculptor in contemporary contexts.

The same notion can be applied to printmaking, with the object of printmaking not being labeled as a print due to the result, but emphasising the conceptual engagement in the production of a print, focusing on the conjunction of *practice* and interaction in the comprehensive sequential process of the transmission of a hard copy print with its collective tools and materials (e.g., inks, plates, roller, press, acid). The categorisation argument by Hirsch is a starting point to engage in our perception of the print medium regarding a set of activities. An operation performed based on a set of techno-cultural terms, as artists as agents in a wider cultural field, to evaluate the medium of printmaking in conjunction with the aura of the artist practice and the conceptual processes that integrate into the medium, foremost the *matrix* as a *trace carrier* of that *practice*.

¹³ Huber, Robert, *Defining Sculpture: Beyond the Expanded Field*, *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, vol. 6, issue 5, 2012

THE MERGE OF PRACTICE AS MATRIX

The merge of *practice* as *matrix* can be noticed in the work of contemporary artist Ester Fleckner who is working with queer and trans epistemologies. This is an excerpt from Fleckner's biography:

*Fleckner mostly works with woodcut printing – a simple and immediate technique that allows for differences, errors and a loss of control. As a natural material, wood is apt for Fleckner's exploration of the collisions between the body and various cultural norms. Fragments of text or drawing are often added in pencil as interaction or dialogue with the graphics works. Fleckner's practice expands from the woodcuts to include cast concrete sculptures, drawings, text work and performative readings.*¹⁴

Fleckner is using the woodcut printmaking technique. The technique and its sequential means allow for differences, errors, loss of control, or as mentioned, accidents and unpredictability. The *matrix* receives a metaphorical weight as an apt for the experiencing body of cultural norms. The medium expands in its confluence with language, pencil drawings, and colliding sculptural objects.

Through these derivations, we can argue that the print has become altered, through the *matrix* in conjunction with the aura and metaphorical weight of Fleckner's *practice*. The woodcut matrix becomes a body, granted equivalent attributes as the sequential process of creating the print. A body that is complicated to control, living, and unpredictable as the *matrix*. The collision between the matrix and the body and the message it brings forward becomes clear by its material means that carry the signs of the process of printmaking, as signs pointing out gender norms and differentiating bodies resisting to be categorised in any singular space. The analysis of the biographical excerpt can be juxtaposed with Fleckner's *Clit-dick Register* from 2013, consisting of 22 semi-identical large woodcut prints, which contain rows and rows of uneven and varying sizes of U-shaped forms, printed in different tones. In the margin on the paper itself outside the matrix imprint, pieces of text, seemingly private notes concerning one's body, are written with a graphite pencil. The woodcut print becomes an embodied manifestation, through the wood itself as an organic medium, not one being identical differentiating through discrete but essential variations, like the more obvious; differentiating between the clit and the dick, and moreover, the immateriality and (gender-)bending qualities of (not) asking this question. The *matrix* carries the traces of Fleckner's *practice*, resisting categorisation, and is as the body and the print medium itself 'an ongoing construct'¹⁷.

For the merge of *practice* as *matrix* in regards to plurality of the print medium, we can also consider the project *Collaborative etching*¹⁵ facilitated by *mpaacc* (*multipresent anti-aggressive communal computer*)¹⁶. The project curates different practices into the copper plate as an exhibition space. The submissions have been contributed transnationally, sent as digital files, and somehow marked on the plate



Figure 1

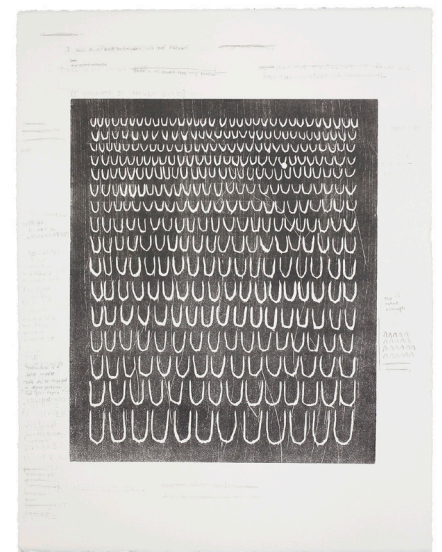


Figure 2

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 Figure 1: Practice example. Ester Fleckner exhibition. A closet does not connect under the bed & Untitled. Installation view. Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, 2016
 Figure 2: Clit-dick register (2013 - 2014). Ester Flecker. Woodcut on paper, pencil. 65x50cm. Series of 22 unique prints.

¹⁴ Fleckner, Ester, Biography and portfolio Ester Fleckner 2018, PDF accessed 4 March 2019, <http://esterfleckner.net/about>

¹⁵ Alice Morey, Kalvebodløbet (bay site): collaborative etching #3 mpaacc, communal.computer 2023, website accessed 19 January 2023, <https://communal.computer/collaborative-etching>

¹⁶ mpaacc is a computational exhibition platform based on Open Source technologies and varieties of anti-capitalism. mpaacc, communal.computer 2023, website accessed 19 January 2023. <https://communal.computer>

¹⁷ Harding, R, Print as other: the future is queer. IMPACT 7, 2013

(e.g., machine-drawn or hand-drawn onto the plate). An anti-thesis on how intaglio printmaking is concentrated today:

Motif, text, diagram, transdisciplinary input, and the application of unconventional methods will be etched cross-border into the copper plate as an exhibition space. A computational copper plate, smeared with etching primer and marked with the etching needle, extended by the limb (e.g., hand), the mechanic (e.g., plotter), and the other (e.g., non- and more-than-human actors, unexpected materials), etched into a singular entity¹⁸.

In this example, we are engaging multiple auras of practices within one matrix, an incentive for the medium and tradition of printmaking as a collaborative and plural practice. *Collaborative etching #3 (copper etching on cotton, 13x11cm matrix 2021)* is a collaboration between a human actor and a more-than-human actor, Alice Morey, and a bay in Copenhagen, Denmark called Kalvebodløbet. The facilitating platform *mpaacc* becomes an entity with an artistic agency in itself, a countermeasure to oligopoly, symbolising an automatised, industrial, and globalised component that can enable or activate both artists (human) and their surroundings (e.g., more-than-human) in an attempt of equivalence. This means that the facilitating platform, the artist, as well as their organic environment, becomes entangled in the conceptual engagement that precedes the production of the actual *matrix*, working against categorisation and specialisation (of the craft, e.g., “the master printmaker”) in a singular space through collaborative and plural practices.

The motif by the British artist Alice Morey is not a coincidence. Morey works with organic materials as well as various sorts of consumables, and containers, and responds to them through painting. Works are sensitive to their surroundings, and become a part of their relations, the artists and the visitor’s bodies:

Delicate yellow spores floating like lily pads in a lagoon of yogurt; curdled dairy separated into strata of bright turquoise blue; creamy rose rivulets coagulating on the sides of glass vessels, giving rise to condensation that collects above. Sometimes we are attracted to the repellent. Such is the case with Alice Morey’s first institutional exhibition, “Conditioning Demands,” in which the artist mixes pigments with probiotic bacteria to foster the growth of mold, proposing decay as a proxy for transformation¹⁹.

The water and stones, running through the bay of Kalvebodløbet, in which the copper plate has been submerged, marked the copper plate with background noise, in which Morey’s motif appears. The motif is an icon of a watery plant-like structure, marked with a line, to indicate a diagrammatic *above | below*, a structure recognisable in other works by Morey. The motif below of the line is distorted, multiplying, and vibrating, hidden through the mechanic repetition, while the above becomes solid, graspable, and representational. The more-than-human, its aura of time and space, of the bay Kalvebodløbet, merges with the aura of Morey’s artistic *practice* – the organic and sensible, working together with the uncontrollable matrix of the copper plate,



Figure 3

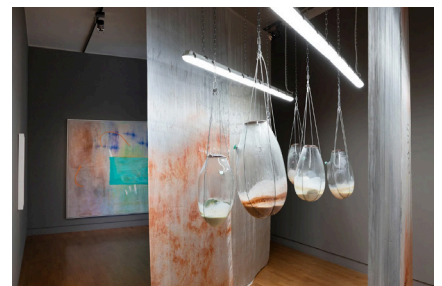


Figure 4



Figure 5

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Art Forum (MEMMINGEN Alice Morey), website accessed 19 Jan 2023. <https://www.artforum.com/picks/alice-morey-88898>

Figure 3: Alice Morey. Kavelbodløbet (bay): Collaborative etching #3 (2021). Copper etching on cotton. 13 x 11 cm. Matrix.

Figure 4: Practice example. Photographer: Sebastian Bühler. Alice Morey exhibition Conditioning Demands. Curated by Lorenzo Graf. Mewo Kunsthalle, Memmingen (DE). 2022. Figure 5: More-than-human environment. Kalvebodløbet, in which the copper plate has been submerged. Photograph: Anders Aarvik (author).

manipulated through computation, etching, and organic environment in the facilitating entity of *mpaacc*, feeding into each other's aura, becoming one through the multiplicity of the matrix.

The diagram *Aura of practice as matrix in print production* aims to illustrate the interconnected merge between *matrix* and *practice*, facilitated by the concept and loop of *aura* in the conceptual engagement of printmaking. It seeks to demonstrate how these elements are linked to both the practical and conceptual aspects of creating a print, spanning from general production to surface manipulation to the printed result (*imprint*). In this process, there's a significant *disruption* of the concept of *reproducibility*, which, in turn, influences the perceived external *value* of the print. For instance, it may lead to the categorisation of printmaking as *the other* or a misunderstood medium that exists outside of practice and the market. Therefore, it's essential to consider the diverse notions and qualities associated with printmaking when re-evaluating what it has evolved to, as an expanded field and beyond. These aspects, which are visualised in this diagram, represent distinct elements within the sequences of print production that can be sliced through for *disruption* and thereby merge with the artist's *practice* in a constant interaction with *matrix*.

AURA OF PRACTICE AS MATRIX

The lines between mediums have become blurred and invite an open discussion about how critical theory is applied to medium, an opportunity to re-evaluate our definition of crafts for the future and specifically printmaking as a techno-cultural system that is responsive to its surroundings, as well as the direct junction between the aura of the artist *practice* and the *matrix* as a trace carrier. As we have seen with the historical development of conceptual practices, blurring out through history to *the expanded field* and *beyond*, Huber points out that we can never separate the medium from *practice*.

Fleckner's, Morey's, and Kalvebodløbet's auras merged into the matrices in the sequential process of printmaking, inseparable from the craft itself, and are no matter what tightly joined with(in) the *matrix*. This has been observed through the collaborative practices of *mpaacc* (*multipresent anti-aggressive communal computer*), in which Morey has been collaborating with the water and stones of the bay Kalvebodløbet, with multiple practices and therefore auras merging into the copper plate as a singular entity, and Fleckner's method to embody the personal into the matrices of their prints with a clear application of queer epistemologies that goes together with printmaking earlier referred to as *the other*.

Benjamin argued that even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. He referred to this unique cultural context, "*its presence in time and space as its 'aura'*"²⁰. Australian artist and writer Clare Humphries states in her article *Aura and the Dialectics of Printmaking*, that "[...] *In the words of printmaker*

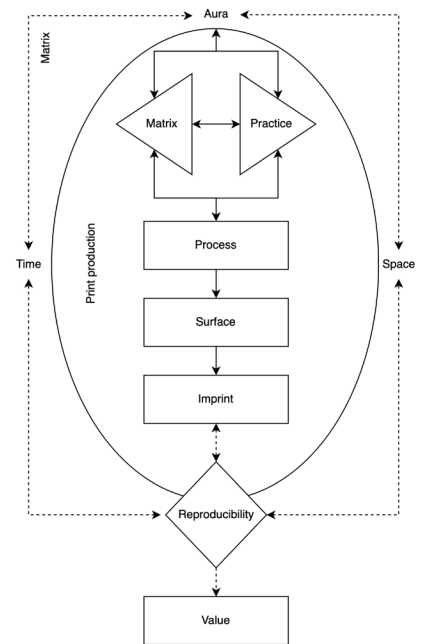


Figure 6

²⁰ Benjamin, W. *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (J. A. Underwood, Trans.). Penguin Books, 2008.

Figure 6: Diagram drawn by author. Aura of practice as matrix in print production.

and writer Ondrej Michalek: "printmaking is perhaps best characterised by the word *between*". The significance of reproduction extends beyond its capacity to change our relationship to other forms of art, and is also found in the way that it reconstructs our understanding of authenticity and our experience of *aura*.'²¹

It is this between, of aura, time, space and the sequential process, printmaking endures. It reveals printmaking as a multifaceted and manipulable medium, that can be disrupted in every sequence of the production with the aura of the artist's *practice* merging with the printmaking *matrix* in a techno-cultural engagement, as we have seen in the diagram *Aura of practice as matrix* in print production. It is through the quality of being multiple and *reproducible* that the medium is open to be further *sliced through*, and allows for continuous exploration that can withstand extensive conceptual engagement from alternative epistemologies to collaborative practices.

Transmedial prints, enclosed icons of aura.

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²¹ Humphries, C. *Aura and the Dialectics of Printmaking*, RMIT University, 2010.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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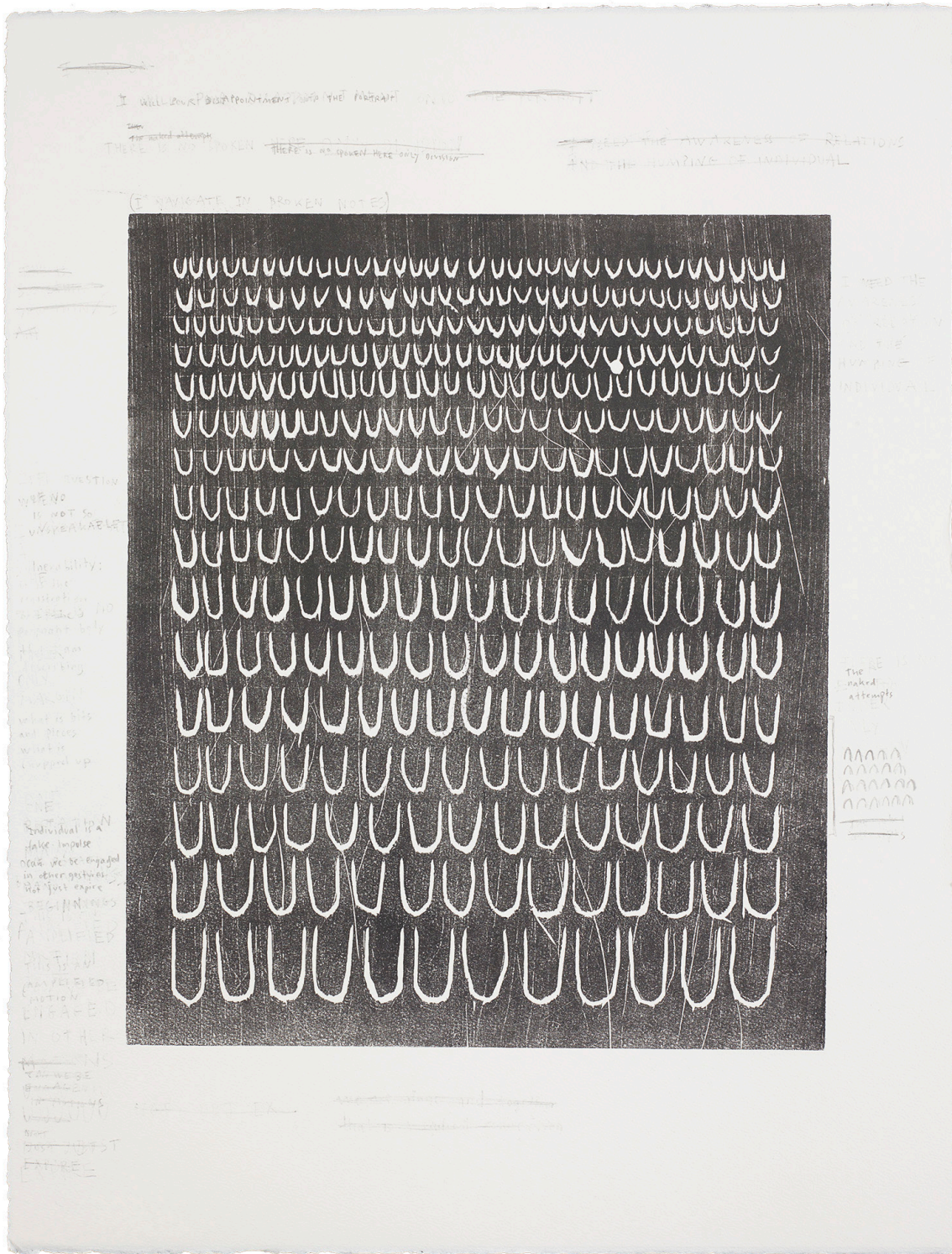


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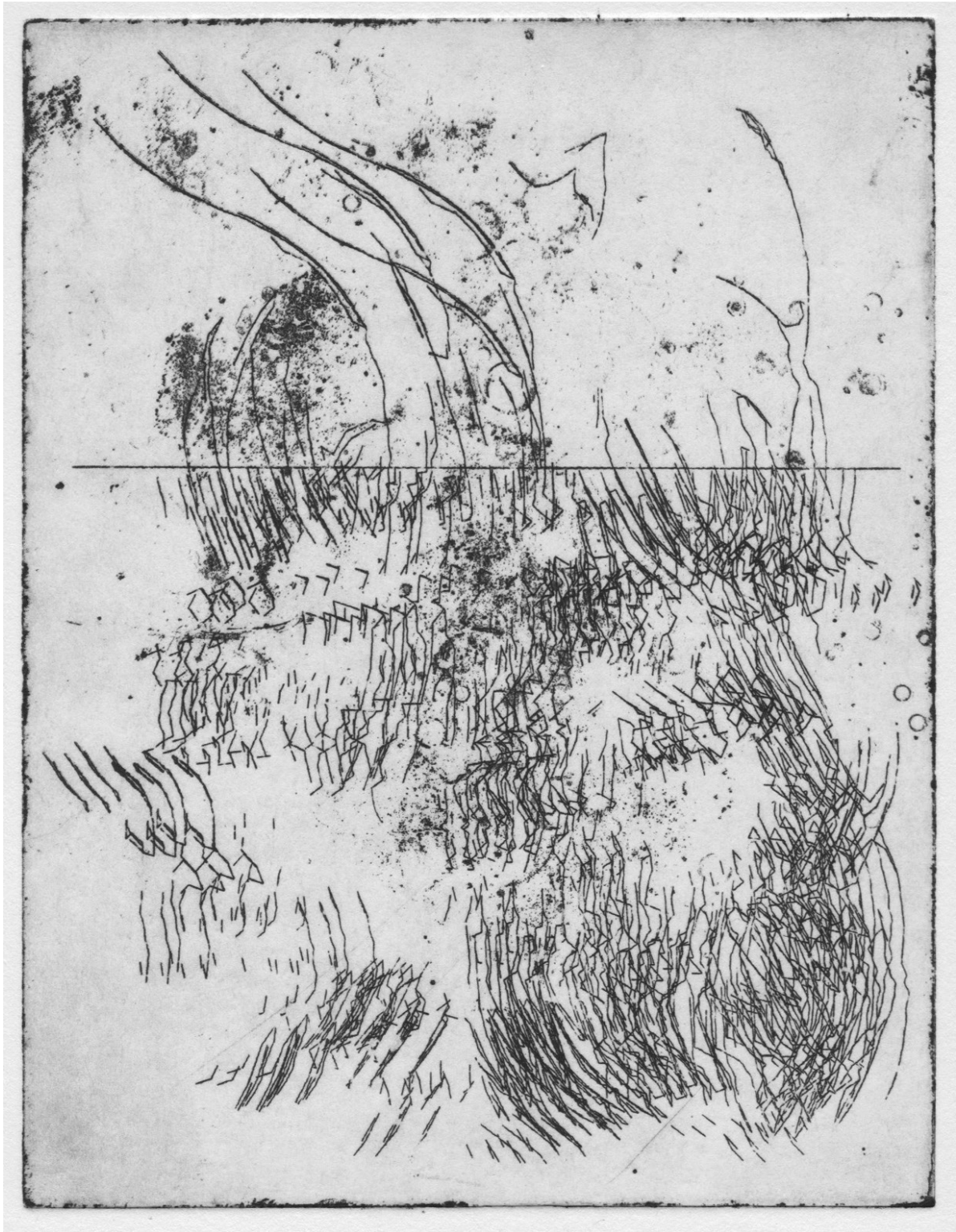


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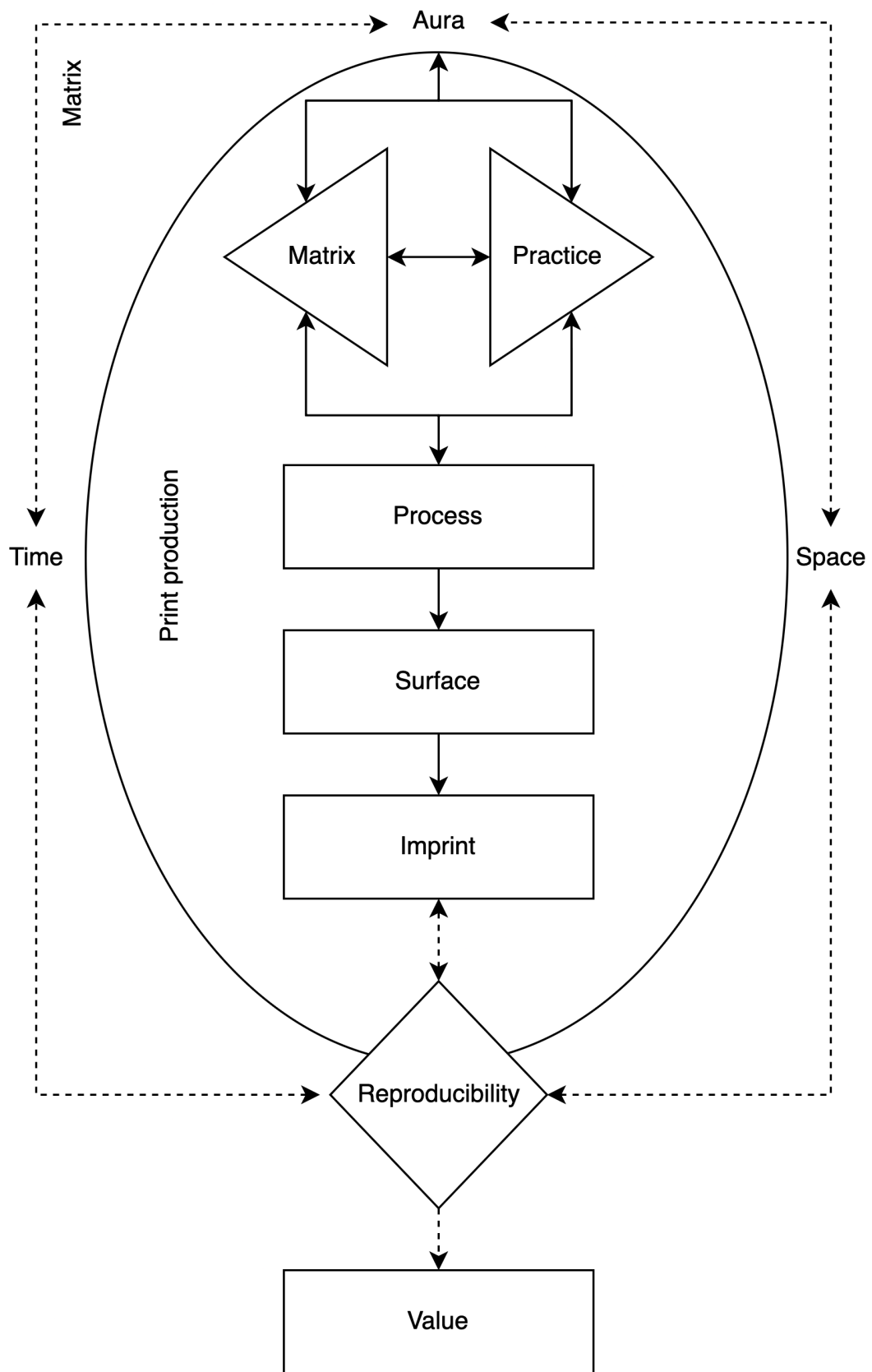


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