

Print as Infection

Carolyn Mckenzie Craig

I would like to pay my respects to the
 elders – past and present – on whose land
 I live and work,
 the Gadigal people of the Eora nation.

My research considers how print can be exploited from the perspective of infection, to corrupt representational practices of power via acts of copy/trace and 'spread'. This draws upon theories of the Cultural Screen (Silverman, 1996), where a society's conception of reality is defined through a shared projection of images and discourses, that define the way normal and 'good' exist in opposition to the 'Other' as dirty and foul. I propose that a creative research practice using print 'as copy' can disrupt the Realist Screen by inserting viral contaminations to replicate and disperse within it. Such disruptions offer Deleuzian slippages in the field of cultural production itself.

Two bodies of current research will be discussed within this framework, *The Colonised Body and Hygiene Practices*. In *The Colonised Body*, I exploit my carceral representation to 'spoil' and invert the moral saturation of image discourse. By creating copies of myself, I insert my representation (as inmate) back into the social sphere of normalcy. The second body of work I discuss uses dust printing to distribute the remains of the affectual pain of detention and enclosure, and the same material ideas of contamination and filth.

"Dirt is matter out of place."
 (Douglas, 1966, p.44)

DIRTY IMAGES

The flux of images through which subjects are formed projects a "political economy of Sameness" (Braidotti, 2002, p.17) that colonises bodies with ongoing binaries of social inclusion via normalcy and its opposite – exclusion and enclosure. Metanarratives of pollution and taboo circulate from Foucault's historical genealogies of the schoolhouse, asylum, and hospital, to its contemporary affectual targets that remain

grounded in race, class, and gender. Subordinate to all these classifications is the body of the offender. It remains a contested social site, haunting social equality with its spectral shadow of pain, prohibition, and extractive residue. It underpins capital and social exclusion and justifies the moral purity of the social structure through its ritual punishments and shame (Foucault, 1979; Baldry, 2009; Carlen, 1998). My research practice uses the offender body as "adulterating material" (Douglas, 1966, p.162) to infect homogeneity with tactical multiplication via print processes. This is an attempt to undermine my own fixity as the trope of the 'deviant woman', fixed via legislative and moral codes¹. Legislative fear keeps my body bound within the municipal protocols of economic and geographic exclusion.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Carolyn Craig (2020) *Roadside (remains) #1*, Charcoal dust printed through silkscreen, 90x120cm

Figure 2: Carolyn Craig (2020) *Left Behind in Lithgow*. Left: charcoal powder print, 110 x 90cm. Right: twin channel video on a loop at 4.40.

Its spectral status at the edges of representation haunts mainstream society with its shame and leaking abjection.

I integrate this offender body and its spectral residues into an expanded conception of the print matrix to produce, leak, and replicate, to “disturb identity, system, order”. This engages with the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 65) and draws on the idea that purity is defined by being unmixed and the impure, by contrast, is codified within its state of disorder and carnivalesque confusion.

This conception is central to my use of the copy as an operational discourse in contrast to traditional print editions that cement social protocols of normalcy. My practice, by contrast, attempts to disrupt the middle-brow normative and the auratic to emancipate “the work from its parasitical dependence on ritual”, that fixes representation in the social order and traps us in our own rituals and demarcations (Benjamin, 1935, p.224). I see the Screen of Reality as a kind of matrix and material, where I target modes of textual circulation to interrupt the repetitions that sustain ‘sameness’. John Tagg describes the Realist Cultural Screen as working through “the controlled and limited recall of a reservoir of similar ‘texts’ by constant repetition, a constant cross-echoing. By such a ‘silent quotation’, a relation is established between the realist ‘text’ and other ‘texts’ from which it differs and to which it refers” (1988, p.99). By intersecting this constant flow with a defective ‘text’, the code of repetition is disrupted and soiled with the leaking residue of abjection and confusion.

RESEARCH PRACTICE

In the studio, I use experimental materials to conceptually adapt print technologies to allow spill and infection. I make use of repetition itself as an infection. My goal is to force the trace of the offender’s body into the mainstream social practices from which they are excluded. Exploiting both the material history of print as coloniser (Bacon, 1620, p.63) and as a vehicle of change (Eisenstein, 1979).²

THE COLONISED BODY

“The camera/gaze intervenes in the real, not only by abducting it but also by installing the image in its place.” (Silverman, 1996, p.149)

The offender’s body is semiotically fixed as both abject and polluted. It also operates as a colonised ‘site’, one Othered by its own spectral contagion, and socially erased by the presence of power and exclusion. Within this state of fixity, affect becomes its only avenue for agency and de-territorialised movement (in both the Deleuzian sense and the real).

My research harvests the affectual remains of the offender’s body and its representational trope (the full-frontal mug shot) to dislodge



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 3: Carolyn Craig (2022) remains (work in progress).

Figure 4: Carolyn Craig (2022) Hygiene Practices, still frame from video at 5:57.

Figure 5: Carolyn Craig (2022) Hygiene practices (vitrine) with screen-printed text, 107 x 107 x 8cm

1. Criminal offenders who serve more than six months in custody in New South Wales can never have their offences removed from publicly accessible records and must declare their offences for employment, visa entry and public service. See New South Wales (NSW) Criminal Records Act 1991, part 2(7) - <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/act-1991-008>, accessed June 1, 2022

2. Here I am thinking of Sir Francis Bacon’s observation of the relationship between “printing, gunpowder and the magnet” and its influence in empire and expansion (Sir Francis Bacon, *Noum Organum Scientiarum*, Book 1, 1620, reprinted in Memphis: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2012, p.63).

its fixity from the Realist Screen. The Colonised Body emerged from a site visit to Lithgow in 2020 during the height of the Australian bushfires, just after the town had been evacuated as the fire closed in. Field research was instigated after reports that inmates had been left behind in Lithgow Prison and placed into lockdown while the rest of the population was moved to safety. I wanted to witness the spatial circumference of smoke, custody, neglect, and fear, to consider what it felt like to be confined to a cell for days, issued with a single-entry level P2 mask, and struggling to breathe as the socially discarded waste of first-world society. On the days I spent in the area, the polluted air, still thick with smoke from active fires, made it difficult to breathe, even inside a vehicle and while wearing a mask. The dismissal of the bodies of those within the perimeter of social exclusion deeply affected me, particularly given my own history of detention. I felt the need to give presence to this erasure of subjectivity. As I drove out of Lithgow and back towards Sydney, the smoke enclosed the car with the weight of the remains of the offenders' bodies who could not leave. I filmed the temporal remnants of fire through the car windscreen and the project developed from that moment – the moment I knew I could leave physically but was still eternally bound to my carceral body. How can I overcome the social fear of moral/viral contamination from my body (the body of the offender) – still perceived as the polluted capital of the discarded hand?

I imagined the enclosure of smoke (a secondary prison) restricting the inmates' breathing as a direct commentary on the lack of economic value of the bodies in detention. I considered how to use affect as a mediated state to give presence to the discarded body/bodies of the offender, to unravel the fixed state of moral contamination and containment: "How does a body, marked in its duration by these various encounters with mixed forces, come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)?" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.2)

I 'foraged' for abjection, collecting charcoal remains from the roadside. Each time I stopped I felt my privilege of movement and remembered my own carceral contamination/containment by power. Each time I left, I took a single image through the car window as a homage to those confined to remain. These organic remains were then ground into powdered dust to push through the bitmapped images of Lithgow's burnt remains (Fig.1).

Bitmaps speak of the history of image codification and the spectral presence of the pixel. Pushing slippery material through the mechanised image matrix transfers spectral uncertainty. The surface of the charcoal 'travels'; its instability is unable to 'capture' a mimetic trace with any purity. Roadside (remains) and Left Behind in Lithgow speak of the discarded bodies in society, using the spectral uncertainty of the windscreen image as a haunted remnant of those denied visibility – those for whom climate change and economic uncertainty will mean social erasure. In a time of social

constriction and reduced capital, these subjects will be left behind. The operational uncertainty of this material also offered a field of action to re-codify my past and its spectral pain. I posed within an act of repetition that forms the chorus of my practice as the deviant woman. I pressed this image (Fig.2) through the holes of the screen to force my presence into proximity. My image mingles with the smoke of Lithgow's remains to inhabit the physical and metaphoric site of affectual carbon, and to re-inscribe the temporal state of erasure and becoming through the detritus of copy-based practices.

This focus on using my own corporal knowledge of detention continued with a second suite of works that engaged with the linguistic remnants of affect. Language is activated as printed repetition to give voice to the marginalised and discarded. In these works, I avoided the body as material as a strategy to seduce normalcy's gaze, to entice with something familiar, and then to operationally de-familiarise through affect. This work consisted of a plaster cast made from wood carvings using prison phrases combined with 'remain/remains' – in homage to cemetery engravings (Fig.3) – as well as a large neon text piece. Plaster was chosen for its material relationship to bones and a continuation of the metaphor of bodily 'remains'. This operates in dissonance with the vibrating neon that reflects our dependence on projection to construct meaning.

HYGIENE PRACTICES – PURITY AND THE MODERNIST SQUARE

Hygiene Practices investigates more directly how society codifies 'dirty' and 'clean' subjects, focusing on purification practices and the Modernist square as ritual vehicles that demarcate bodies and power. As an academic in an art college heavily grounded in art historical dialogues, I struggle to comprehend its existing legacy and relevance to bodies like mine. The purist of a black (or white) square reads directly to structural metaphors of control, exclusion, and purity. The square is a spartan aesthetic device requiring a huge dialogic repertoire to comprehend it. I think of a prisoner's scopic resentment towards the modernist landscape of white society's vision, as they are forced to live in a concrete square as part of a broader carceral regime of sensory restriction and abuse.

I felt a need to unravel this growing complicity in replicating meta-art historical narratives. As a printmaker, I know acts of repetition have power, so I filmed myself performing the modernist purity of the square with dirt harvested from my backyard, played on a repeat loop. This dirt was contaminated with the faecal waste of our dog. My chore as the female in the domestic charter of power is to pick up the dog poo. I wonder if this reflects my underlying status as filth. I feel this status under my skin.

To negate this act of modernist purity/parody, I then erase the square in a ritual act of cleansing. The act of drawing a matrix and then erasing it embodies a state of formalist knowing/not knowing, unravelling the historical art narratives that exclude Othered bodies,

such as those considered dirty or disabled. It also performs my own complicity in the replication of these overarching visual archetypes that form outdated notions of foundational material knowledge. In front of the work, I use text to confront this dialectical confusion, screen-printed onto the water. The surface of water allows my linguistic 'acts' to slowly dispel into an abject pool of inter-relational confusion. Here the vitrine is the soiled body of the Other paying homage to the performative protocols of contemporary art.

Further works such as Proximal Noise consider how power colonises the body through the seeping protocols of linguistic violence. Through a suite of twelve archived 'acts', I perform avoidance responses within the artifice of a square (reminiscent of a boxing ring). The movements harvest the affectual remnants of Othering and reflect a guttural response to a growing volume of social exclusions and sonic hatred in our society. Contemporary politics have sprayed words like confetti over our democracies and decimated care and empathy. It leaves a deep internal void.

CONCLUSION: AFFECT AND SHAME

These material and conceptual actions exploit two strains of potential within print as materiality – its viral potential to replicate and its technological means of image production as a state of becoming. The copy is exploited to extract affect as a trace, either as a direct representation or as a corporeal haunting via the spread of material dust (carbon; of the body). Affect as shame and representational denial is then forced back into the Realist Cultural Screen. These acts incorporate cultural and photographic theory within an expanded print practice – via the particular technologies of the matrix and its reproductive culture. Print material's potential as a vehicle to capture and distribute traces allows me to explore unstable materials such as charcoal that remain insecure and spectral in their material presence. Casting etchings in substrates such as soap offers a visceral and indeterminate outcome, one porous to the world and soiled with abject failure. This reflects the precarious representational politics that underwrite my spectrality in the world.

My body, by its very presence in spheres of normalcy, is a rupture, an uncertainty principle. I am proof of shame – or not enough shame. My index is a deeply political act. Using masquerade as a subterfuge and copy as transgression, the carceral body mixes within the singularity of social typologies to dislodge representation as fixity and power. As a subject refused entry, I no longer aim for integration, but pure infection. My body's abject state seeps within institutional dialogue: to operate as a Deleuzian slippage, a temporal release from stable hierarchies, and to invert carceral power over the body and its representational practices. This operates within a strategic mimetic confusion where linguistic, legalistic and representational frameworks are soiled by the osmotic representational Other.

AUTHOR

Dr Carolyn Mckenzie- Craig

Head of Printmaking, National Art school, Sydney, Australia
E: Carolyn.mckenzie-craig@nas.edu.au

Carolyn is an interdisciplinary artist examining how power is articulated within and through the body and language. Her research considers how representational practices are implicit within the construction of class, sexed and racial tropes. Her studio practice archives remnants from performative 'acts' or site-specific investigations. This material is then re-contextualised through print processes to destabilize its normative representational value as social collateral and to articulate affect. Her material focus is within copy-based protocols. She is a current director at Frontyard Projects, Sydney and Schmick Projects in Haymarket.

Carolyn teaches at the National Art School in Sydney where she is Head of Printmaking and has been a finalist in the Churchie, Freemantle, Burnie, Bangkok Drawing and Print Triennial as well as many others.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Carolyn Craig (2020) Roadside (remains) #1, Charcoal dust printed through silkscreen, 90x120cm

Figure 2: Carolyn Craig (2020) Left Behind in Lithgow. Left: charcoal powder print, 110 x 90cm. Right: twin channel video on a loop at 4.40.



Figure 3: Carolyn Craig (2022) remains (work in progress).

Figure 4: Carolyn Craig (2022) Hygiene Practices, still frame from video at 5.57.



Figure 5: Carolyn Craig (2022) Hygiene practices (vitrine) with screen-printed text, 107 x 107 x 8cm