

# PRINTMAKING COMMUNITIES AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS

Simon Harris and Laura Onions

## FORMATION OF PRINTMAKING COMMUNITY

The theme for this year's conference, 'The Printmakers Voice', and the notion of a 'Post-pandemic Voice', has prompted reflection upon the previously taken-for-granted social and material aspects of printmaking now brought into sharp focus. Utilising ideas from complexity theory and alternative geographies in this paper, we consider how the printmaking community we are part of has evolved and how the printmakers' voice and the post-pandemic voice meet.

Printmaking is an integral part of the BA (Hons) Fine Art course at the Wolverhampton School of Art. There are introductory workshops in the first year, developing into an advanced 'experimental printmaking and photography' workshop in the second year. In 2016-17, a 'Print Club' developed out of this formal teaching and learning space into weekly sessions on Wednesday evenings, 5 – 7 pm. The Club brings together across a range of courses (not solely fine art) students and staff who have a specific interest in pursuing printmaking. There are no set agendas, and Print Club members work on their own projects alongside each other in a supportive environment. There are regulars who come each week and those who drop in, some who are trying to realise a project or those who want to sit and chat. Recognising the impact of space and place on social cohesion and voice, we borrow from feminist geographer Doreen Massey, who stated that 'space is a product of inter-relations between people and place'<sup>i</sup> and one in which different trajectories co-exist and are always under construction. Collective moments of social interaction orbit around printing presses, spaces of multiplicity embedded within material practices.

Further, author and activist Alison Gilchrist notes how the experience of 'community' is both an outcome and the context of informal networking through loosely co-ordinated collective activities. She suggests that environments that favour networking-type interactions are characterised by 'diversity, autonomy, voluntary choices, risk, and

turbulence.'<sup>ii</sup> This has become known as an 'edge of chaos' model, according to which in an uncertain world, systems operate somewhere between rigidity and randomness. These ideas connect with printmaking workshops on multiple levels through their physical manoeuvres (between visibility and invisibility, control and lack of control, difference, and repetition) and their spatial relations in a state of 'untidy creativity.'



Figure 1



Figure 2

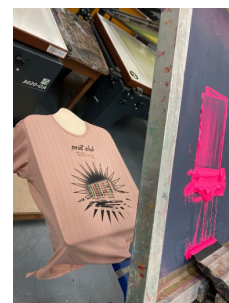


Figure 3

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: *Print Club in Screen-Printing Workshop 2021*. Photo Simon Harris.  
 Figure 2: *The Club*, Cyanotype print developed in B&W darkroom at University of Wolverhampton. Photo Simon Harris.  
 Figure 3: *The Ritual - Print Club Logo*, screen printing workshop at University of Wolverhampton. Photo Laura Onions.

What Massey and Gilchrist contribute to our thinking is that just as personal identities are multiple and shifting, so are the identities of place. With the spatial upheaval of Covid 19, the intersection between people and place became destabilised – with no access to workshops or studios, the relationship between public and private space as well as virtual and actual spaces became blurred.

## BOUNDARY CROSSINGS: HYBRID AND DOMESTIC WORKSHOPS

As we moved into the pandemic, it quickly became apparent that we needed to establish a sense of material practice, adapting how printmaking can take place within domestic spaces. Posting out 'care packages' and facilitating workshops online became our strategy. We took the notion of printmaking to its broadest understanding and included any output that had been *printed*.

The 'care packages' contained key materials for making a dry-point etching, monoprints, collagraph plates, pre-sensitised paper for cyanotypes, and matchboxes to make pinhole cameras. Developing tanks and alternative recipes for developing films (ingredients which could be sourced via the online supermarket shop) invited a clash of trajectories into the domestic space. These materials carry a set of languages and practices which may seem 'at odds' with that of our homes, but this enabled a new set of subjectivities to be encountered, as well as new relations between things.

Manuel DeLanda notes that assemblage theory can provide a 'framework' in which there is 'a whole whose properties emerge from the interaction between parts.'<sup>iii</sup> Print Club, we believed, could be considered such an assemblage. DeLanda notes that 'institutional organisations are assemblages of people'. Indeed, the Club had started to establish its history through the formation of rituals, albeit some had now been disrupted through the lockdown, as the Club moved online and the relations between things changed. Content had to be established and new regimes of signs were instigated. The first order of signs that activated itself was the sharing of practice. Once pre-pandemic, the community came together and some worked on projects, whilst others sat and chatted, yet few shared the results of their endeavours or dared offer critique. The community was supportive but perhaps without criticality. As we moved into the lockdown and our strategy of 'care packages' had been delivered and online content was sufficiently prepared to commence, we began. Very quickly it became apparent that we had formed a new assemblage, one that had a continued and supportive approach and, importantly, now a criticality within it. The community wanted to share. In the first four weeks, 154 images had been shared. The community regularly shared tips and advice on how to progress with the different techniques that were introduced, how unexpected results or even no results had occurred, how to remedy this, or even where it was best to source the 'chemistry' needed.

As the Club originally established itself in the institutional setting of the print workshops, it territorialised: whilst this did not exclude



Figure 4



In the new package:  
A. Sodium Thiosulfate (link to COSHH document)  
B. Potassium Bromide (link to COSHH document)  
C. 2 x "PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL" labels  
D. PPE including gloves, apron and safety glasses  
E. 1 x Sharp Kodak Tri X (4000) RAW film  
F. 1 x sample film container with film bag (DO NOT WIND THIS REEL)  
G. Plastic clip  
H. Paterson developing tank with 1 x film spool  
I. 2 pieces of black card  
J. Pre-cut B&W photographic paper  
K. Pre-cut 3mm wide adhesive paper (strips of duct tape are stuck to the black bag - these can be used to help with camera construction, a smaller piece of electrical tape is also stuck to the bag; this will be used as a shutter for your camera).

Figure 5

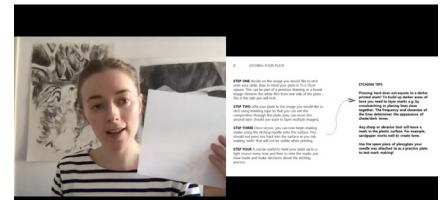


Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 4: Care Packages. Photo Simon Harris.  
Figure 5: Care Packages and their contents. Photo Simon Harris.  
Figure 6: Video tutorials. Photo Laura Onions.  
Figure 7: Video tutorials. Photo Simon Harris.

anyone, it did exclude certain behaviours connected to taught content or analytical review. Once this had been destabilised through the pandemic, and as the spatial boundary of the print workshop had been removed –de-territorialised–, it began to emerge a change in how the formal structure of the processes of traditional print techniques could be resolved. It could be observed that a shared problem-solving approach became evident in how to implement the print process introduced through the online content, and how this could be resolved in the domestic environment. This shared endeavour changed our position: we were not the experts in the field; rather, we were sharing the experimental approaches. Moreover, it emerged a notion that empirical knowledge could be shared rather than seeking confirmation of doing it right. Considering this, the voice of the printmaker has been re-assembled with the experience of place, becoming something co-constructed; rather than being something immanent in a boundary-laden location, it becomes the palimpsestic product of every voice that passes and has passed through.

### CHANGED UNDERSTANDINGS: INTERDISCIPLINARY NARRATIVES

Now we have returned to campus, to the studios and workshops. We have a changed understanding of how a social infrastructure for printmaking may bring together the ‘process of making’ with the ‘process of living.’ This reflects how a feeling of everydayness, being in our own homes but at the same time undertaking risky knowledge-making endeavours, can create ontological and epistemological hybridity. This has been witnessed in the members of the Print Club incorporating a sense of risk, not concerned with solely learning processes, before embarking on their artistic endeavour, but embracing glitches that come from the unknown. A changed relationship to the workshops has become evident, the members producing much more ambitious work in scale, complexity, and experimentation. They no longer start something to be completed in one visit but rather returning repeatedly. This can be observed in the testimonial of a level-six student:

Following the web seminars, handouts, and especially the “Red Cross Parcels” of technical gear and chemicals that were sent out (in the post) to each student, most people appear to have managed to produce something productive during the lockdown.

I’m thinking that what happened, certainly for me, was that you attempted to produce work with very limited resources: shots of your garden, or out of a window, possible items lying around the house. When the university re-opened and you once again have the full resources to complete the work (or push it a bit further), you took full advantage. The few months that were almost gifted to you between carrying out the first and the second attempts allowed your ideas to germinate – you were not “forced” to complete that task; rather, you did it because you wanted to.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

Figure 8: Matchbox pinhole camera online tutorial. Photo Simon Harris.  
Figure 9: Matchbox pinhole camera developed in lockdown. Photo Nicki Gandy.  
Figure 10: Pinhole soda can camera developed in lockdown. Photo Nicki Gandy.  
Figure 11: B&W dark room in bathroom developed in lockdown. Photo Richard Morris.



This becomes interesting as we move forward, as we now return to the institutional space and start to territorialise again, whilst we have a changed empirical approach to the Club and as it has been discussed through the risk-taking and -sharing. How is this sustained for those that have not experienced the destabilisation? Indeed, how does destabilisation sustain itself under formalised rituals? Perhaps we need to take note of Italo Calvino:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.<sup>[v]</sup>

## REFERENCES

- [i] Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. (London: Sage Publishing).  
 [ii] Gilchrist, A. (2000) 'The well-connected community: networking to the edge of chaos' in *Oxford University Press and Community Development Journal*, Vol 35 (3), p.265.  
 [iii] DeLanda, M. (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society Assemblage: Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum), p.5  
 [iv] DeLanda, M. (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society Assemblage: Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum), p.9-16  
 [v] Calvino, I (1974) *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p.165

## AUTHORS

### Laura Onions

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Laura is an artist and lecturer for BA (Hons) Fine Art at the University of Wolverhampton. Influenced by histories of feminist printmaking collectives, Laura has presented print-led research in national and international conferences focusing on the collective spaces of printmaking and the ways in which we support and hold onto knowledge through printed matter.

Recent research papers include *Printing Press as Boundary Object* (2021) National and University Library, Ljubljana Slovenia; *Print as a Collective Space for Learning & Social Practice* (2020) CASS, London Metropolitan University; *Reading Otherwise* (2019) Association for Art History annual conference, Brighton.

### Simon Harris

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Simon is an artist and a senior lecturer for the BA (Hons) Fine Art at the University of Wolverhampton. Simon's publications include the

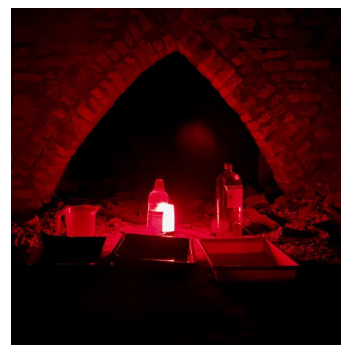


Figure 12

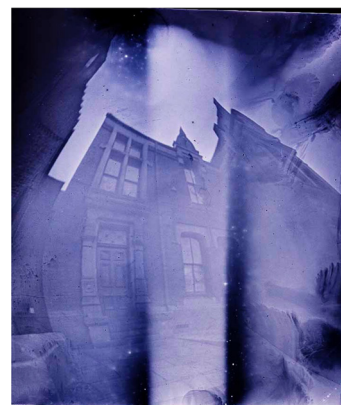


Figure 13



Figure 14

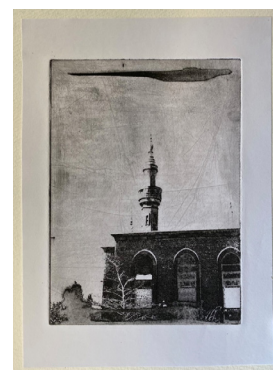


Figure 15

Figure 12: B&W dark room in cellar developed in lockdown. Photo Nicki Gandy.  
 Figure 13: Pinhole soda can camera print developed in lockdown. Print & Photo Nicki Gandy.  
 Figure 14: Pinhole soda can camera print developed in lockdown. Print & Photo Ryan Sefton.  
 Figure 15: Photogravure developed at Print Club. Print & Photo James Banks.

book chapter Painting, the Virtual, and the Celluloid Frame in The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality. The chapter discusses and progresses through an aesthetic enquiry into a relationship between the virtual and the actual surface of painting and the implication of cinematic space. Simon's continued research explores the relationships between alternative approaches to photography, printmaking, and painting. Simon was awarded a PhD in 2016.

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Figure 16

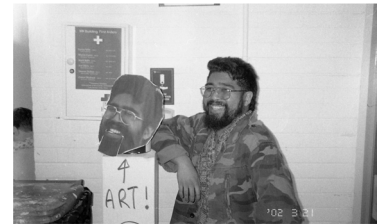


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

Figure 16: Screen print series in progress developed at Print Club. Prints & Photo Jack Westwood.  
Figure 17: Analogue film developed at Print Club. Print & Photo Joshua Mirabueno.  
Figure 18: 'Golden Age', Dry point etching developed at Print Club. Print & Photo Hannah Rollason.  
Figure 19: Dry point etching developed at Print Club. Print & Photo Jatinder Ghataora.  
Figure 20: Print Club in the Intaglio Workshop, Matchbox camera film developed at Print Club. Photo James Banks.

## IMAGE GALLERY



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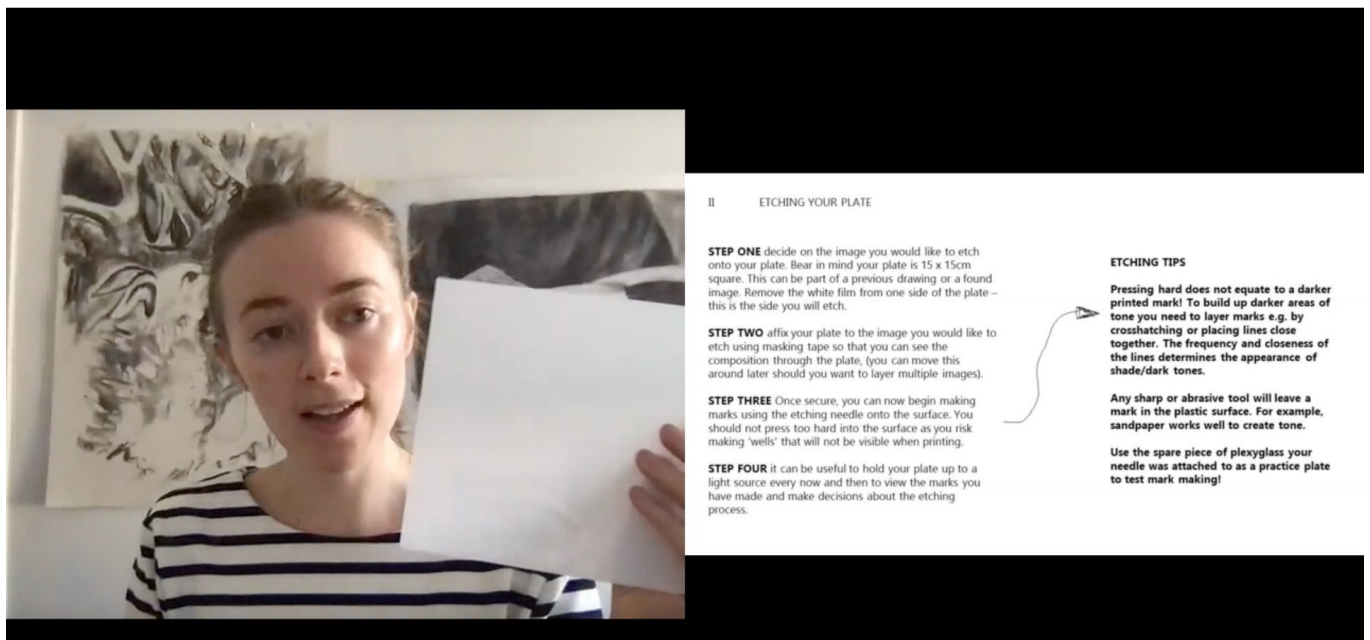


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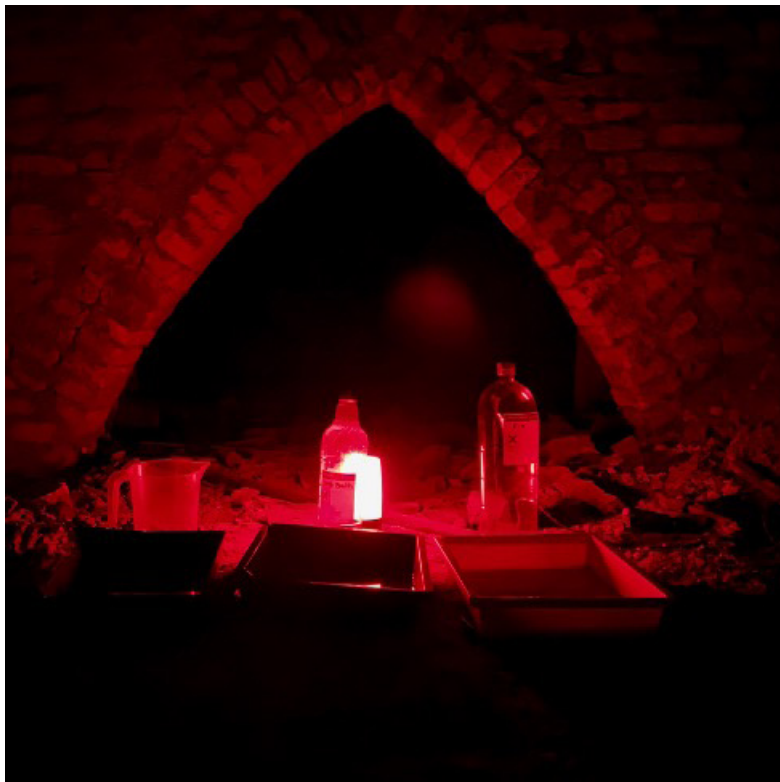


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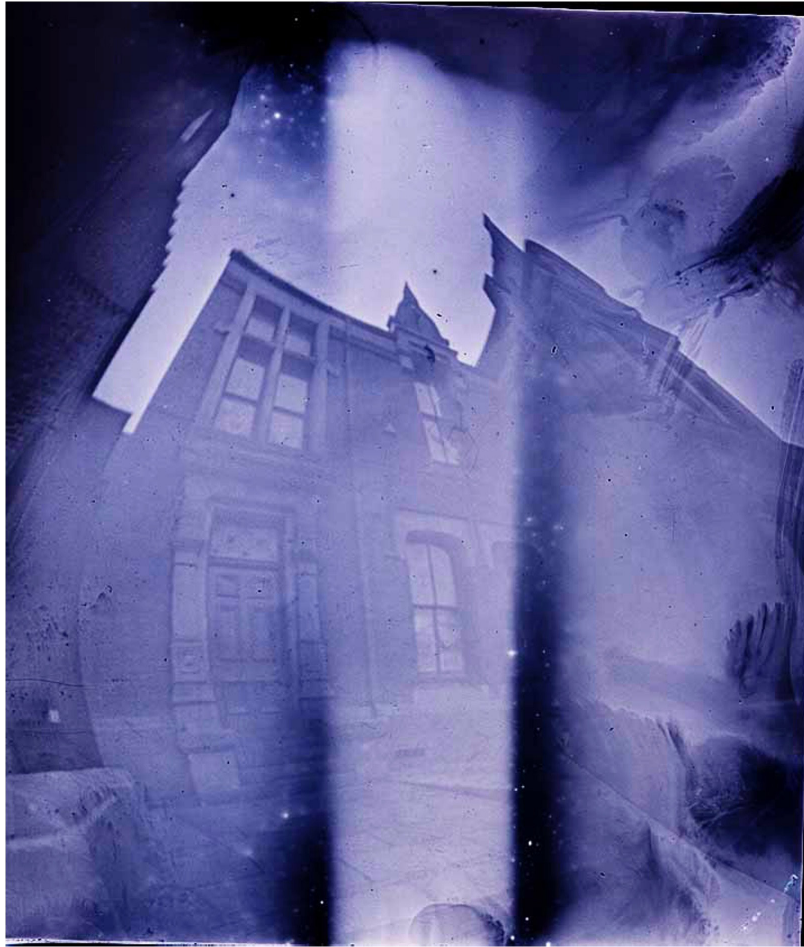


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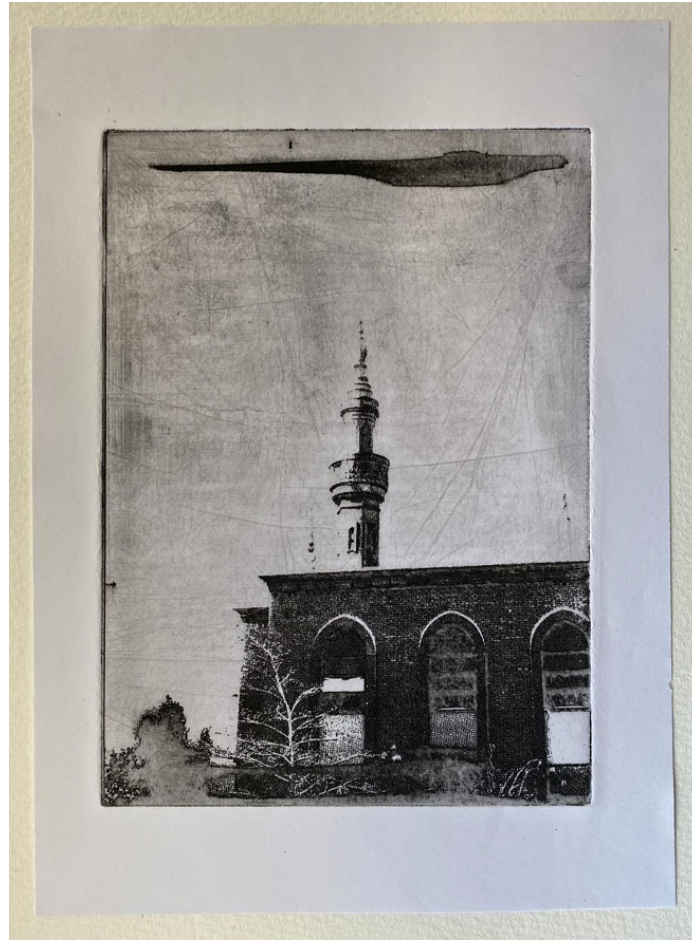


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