

# POST-PRINT: THE MOMENT OF COMPRESSION AS EVENT

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'Post-Print' is a practice-led research project that seeks to situate the emergence of the printmaking tradition (and the notion of the print as 'reproduction') as a pivotal Event that once re-shaped a past era's perception of reality, just as the 'digital multiple' template today has come to function as the de facto contemporary reproduction of 'being'. For this paper, I will draw on Slavoj Žižek's philosophical reading of the notion of 'Event' as a framework for my central thesis. I want to expand on how the moment of compression for a technology for looking (i.e., the introduction of the printing press and the digital device) may be considered a veritable Event. In the process, I will unsurprisingly rely on Walter Benjamin's observations in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' to inspire my discussion of the print as reproduction and the image as Event. This progression of creative discourse—the transition from the 'print' to the 'post' as the means of infinite reproduction—is the central focus of my project, as this shift of mediums contextualises my own mediations of the avalanche of images that characterise the present Event. Rather than mere diversions, I consider historical thinking and anachronism to be the practical methodologies of my work. For me, these retroactive interventions are themselves closely informed by the philosophical strategies of fragmentation and reframing separately proposed by Benjamin and Žižek. Hence, I discuss how these philosophical ideas have shaped the critical processes and curatorial choices within my practice.

## ASSEMBLAGE THINKING

*From my immediate state of isolation, I am forced to mediate my social and emotional distance from the world through the image. As of this writing, I have never experienced such an overwhelming sense of the historicity of the present. The COVID-19 pandemic has eclipsed all memories of ordinary life. Its silhouette casts a long shadow across the globe and, through the epochal lens of the device, society in corollary bears witness to it as an Event trailing*

unprecedented challenges in its wake. Images stream in of empty cities, masked figures, monuments rising and falling, modern plagues, desperate protests, absurd wars, Orwellian hazmat suits, people lining up to vote and joining the breadline, the picket line, the party line, the poverty line, forming lines of worry that snake down the streets and round the corners of our consciousness. And through my own device, I am forced to confront such an Event as no generation ever has before. Like the print in centuries past, the 'digital multiple'—as framed through the device—provides the visual language with which I can begin to articulate the historicity inherent to the catastrophe of the present.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: Post-print

Figure 2: Assemblage Thinking

In the late 1920s, German art historian Aby Warburg created the 'Atlas of Memory' (Warburg, 1929) in response to the cultural fragmentation he had experienced as he grappled with the historicity of his tumultuous present (Forster, 1976). Warburg's visual collection<sup>1</sup> existed to articulate the overwhelming torrent of images he endured during this period of instability and change. From the rubble of a fragmented society, Warburg looked to the classical ruins of antiquity, turning his curatorial gaze upon the polythematic recurrences of the past to counteract his sense of cultural loss in the present (Forster, 1976). Consumed by the systematic assemblage and fragmentation of his constellations of images, Warburg began to lay the foundation for a new kind of historical thinking. This was, in short, a strategy for historical subversion through the manipulation of reproduction. Thus, like Warburg, I seek to formulate creative methodologies within my practice that could refract my experience of present events through intuitive parallels with the chronology of the past (Schwendener, 2020).



Figure 3

In his short book *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept* (2014), philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek argued that "[An] Event is not something that occurs within the world but is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it" (2014:10). In my work, I question how this framing of the present through the mediation of the digital multiple has altered my perception of the world, and how it may constitute (as Žižek argues an Event should) a reframing of my ordinary experience (2014:10). I, therefore, draw parallels between the post<sup>2</sup> and the print as a means of exploring the reproduction's potential for the retroactive re-ordering of an Event through its moment of compression. This 'compression' denotes the momentary fixture of a multitude of subjectivities into the image through the means of a new technology for looking. Therefore, I consider here the immediate historicification of the present through the device and the potential role of the digital multiple in formulating historical narratives.



Figure 4

In this paper, I rely on the theoretical framework of the printmaking tradition in my discussion of the following topics: First, I consider 'The Image as Reproduction', with reference to Walter Benjamin's observations in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) in my discussion of the print as reproduction; second, I expand further to delve into 'The Image as Event', as framed by Slavoj Žižek's philosophical reading of Event. By linking these ideas, I aim to develop my thesis that the moment of compression through the technology for looking, as placed on a metaphoric timeline of the progression of devices, may be considered an Event. Throughout my paper, however, the formal discursive progression of 'the print' to 'the post' remains the epicentre of consideration, as it frames my artistic mediation of images during the present Event through a retroactive gaze. As stated in the abstract, these retroactive interventions are informed by the philosophical strategies of fragmentation and reframing, as proposed by both Benjamin and Žižek. I will henceforth discuss how these philosophical ideas have shaped the critical processes and curatorial choices embedded in my practice.

1. A series of 40 panels consisting of over 1,000 found images, collected from books, magazines, newspapers, and other visual sources.

2. That is, a digital multiple unit, which succeeds the print as a technology for looking. I consider the word 'post' as an interplay between the digital post and the 'post' as an art prefix.

Figure 3: Warburg Wall  
Figure 4: Fragmented Studio

## THE IMAGE AS REPRODUCTION

*Let us peer into the printing studio for a moment. As our eyes adjust to its jarring artificial light, we may become aware of the energy slowly dissipating around us. The hot plate crackles as it cools, and the smell of solvents thins in the air. The studio itself manifests a sort of static, as if the mechanisms on display are poised on the brink of either rising or falling. From tense stillness, a feeling of anticipation arises. Soon, the repetitive tempo of the studio crescendos up the walls to fill the empty ceiling with the sound of making. Once more, 'the image machine' will be put into motion.*

Amidst the rhythmic routines of the creative process, there are moments in which 'the image' emerges. In this moment of compression, experiences from beyond the studio are compressed into the single Event of the image. In his conceptual work 'Sentences on Print' (Field, 1994), Richard S. Field suggests that "[P]rints layer information, embodying traces of the past through acts; they are metaphors for the way in which memory traces impose themselves on all perceptions and thought" (Field, 1994). In this way, printed reproduction represents the accumulation of a multitude of subjectivities, created through the *moment of compression*.

Warburg's 'Atlas of Memory' functions as a visual dialogue between his experiential present and reproductions of the past expressed through a 'comparative view' of visual perspectives. My videographic work responds to what Warburg identified as 'the illusion of images as solidified moments', as I attempt to explore this illusion of fixture through gestures of anachronistic fragmentation and splicing. These techniques amount to a methodology for *putting the fixed image into motion* by approaching the printing process through the lens of the device (Forster, 1976, p. 171). The illusion of the print as a fixed depiction is shattered by the survival and repetition of its own reproduction, as "[beyond] the image, however old it may be, the present never ceases to reshape, [and] the past never ceases to reshape" (Didi-Huberman, 2003)<sup>3</sup>. The image remains discursively present ad infinitum and represents an opportunity to reframe the past through the moment of compression. Warburg's repetitive reconfiguration of image constellations illustrates how the reproduced image draws its significance from both the society in which it was first produced and the perception of its repeated reproduction in the present (Schwendener, 2020). Thus, the reproduction continually bears witness to a multitude of heterogeneous happenings—each a reiteration of the past within the ever-changing context of the present.

Over the past 600 years of visual history, the printing press has served as an invaluable tool with which to shape the narratives of the past through the reproduction of a significant image. From politics to protest, propaganda to publicity, the press has always been an intellectually malleable mechanism in the hands of printmakers. The reproduction of images and text through the printing press has fundamentally shaped the discursive structure of the present by providing an expanded means with which to create and critique

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<sup>3</sup> For Walter Benjamin, the "original possesses all experience that has converged before it." (Benjamin, 1935).

historical narratives and, in turn, the structures of power they delineate. I am not merely concerned with the technological capacity to reproduce the image, but rather with examining the context and content that is reproduced with these images, and how these conditions continue to frame a viewer's engagement. Walter Benjamin, like Warburg, was prodigally responsive to the implications of historical events on the psyche of popular culture. In his work, he considered not only printed reproduction but also the reproduction of images through photography and film as revolutionary representations of reality. This discursive progression from print to film highlights the essence of modern *technology for looking* as such. The enormous rupture in understanding that the digital multiple represents to us is thus akin to the early innovations of the print as reproduction; both technologies mark a pivotal Event in the timeline of human development and the purpose of the *technology for looking* (Benjamin, 1935).



Figure 5

In my practice, I consider an allegorical reading of 'the timeline' to be a hierarchical construct within the tradition of print. I reimagined the *technology for looking* as belonging to a timeline when I first recognised the printing press as an anachronistic device. Its oscillating motion evoked images of Hegel's dialectical pendulum for me. The theme of the timeline here provides the discursive framework for an exploration of the image as an Event. I consider the reproduction, and the production of prints as such, as each being eventual moments along 'the timeline of the press'. The motion of the printing press—barrelling from the past, through the present and into the future—allows for the practical making and remaking of the visual narratives on display in a particular reproduction. Throughout his work, Warburg methodically pursued the 'fragmentation' of the reproduction from its original content and context, thereby releasing the image from the societal constructs of its avowed function. In this way, Warburg began to incise a telling of the present Event by disentangling the occurrence of the reproduction through the very process by which it was first generated, utilising the *technology for looking* as a subversive tool.



Figure 6

I thus consider the fragmentation of the image, through the *moment of compression*, fundamental to my gaining a new reckoning of the historicity of my individual experiential present, for within the very processes of producing and reproducing the image through the printing press and the device, there lies the opportunity to make and unmake the image itself. Etched lines can be burnished, metal flattened, wood cut away, screens can be washed out, and stones sanded down. The layering of various hybrid techniques upon the matrix, as well as in the print itself, allows for the infinite telling and retelling of visual narratives that Warburg may have envisioned.

## THE IMAGE AS EVENT

*First, there is the device: the edge, the screen, its texture, and materiality. Second, there is what can be viewed on the screen: the interface, the program, light and pixels. Between these frames, like the layers of a print, we might begin to extract meaning within the context of the present viewing regime. Between these frames, there is the content: a link to a world*

Figure 5: Fragmented Studio Installation  
Figure 6: iPad Etching

beyond the context of the present. On the device, the future is depicted as something already gone, currently located in the past.

The dual legacy of the print as the creator and critic of historical narrative can also be seen in the disseminative ease afforded by the digital multiple in our present media Event. With the digital multiple, events can be shared, downloaded, and reproduced instantaneously, allowing for a broader distribution of socio-politically and culturally transformative images as it grants individuals creative freedom over the re-appropriation of content and context, regardless of their proximity to the origin of the image. This change from a local to a global means of reproduction frees the image from any last vestige of ownership or authority in its conception, as the *technology for looking* is now readily available. In this way, the reproduction is followed instantaneously by its variation: where the printed reproduction could be possessed by many, the digital multiple is owned ubiquitously. The *technology for looking* encourages engagement with an endlessly repetitive process of telling and retelling. In Event, Slavoj Žižek argued that as reality continues to be mediated through the broadcast image, an ontological understanding of the image as Event is crucial to any interrogation of our present reliance on the *technology for looking*. The Event here represents the accumulation of a multitude of subjectivities perceived as collectively lived experiences. These heterogeneous happenings are more than mere moments in history; they offer a polysemic accumulation of the present moment. Warburg's concerns about the collective capacity to hold societal memory, as mediated through reproduction, resonate with our total dependency on the new narrative technology of our own age.

Whether by the pressure of a thumb or the swipe of an index finger, there are countless small opportunities to participate in and facilitate the trajectory of digital multiple reproduction and, by doing so, begin to enframe the past and present. Through the repetitive retrieval of the post, as the digital multiple, there is also a simultaneous curation of the past. The past is reconfigured in the present, in the moment it is witnessed (*the moment of compression*) through the very frame of the device it streams through. Akin to the motion of the printing press, the habit of mechanically scrolling back and forth through a timeline reflects the action of producing and reproducing the image. Comparable to the meeting of two rollers on the printing press, the device as a timeline affords us a horizontal, as well as a vertical, chronology of past occurrences within the present. This flattening of the temporal landscape offers an understanding of 'being' as something eternally discursively present. More than a tool for recounting past Events, the device functions as a mechanism for a totalised enquiry, allowing for perpetual anachronistic telling and retelling. Just as the moment of compression is always present through reproduction, the Event remains 'alive' in discourse, for it is within the present that the past is perpetually reconstructed. More than just a moment in history experienced as part of the cyclical recurrence of the past, the Event is 'being' itself "*understood as history*" (Žižek, 2014).

Our collective mediation of the historical present through the image imbues the *technology for looking* with the agency to shape



Figure 7



Figure 8

intersubjective narratives instantaneously, thus allowing for the ceaseless manipulation of our experiences of reality through reproduction as variation. In this way, to consider the digital multiple as an Event is to acknowledge how the parameters of the *technology for looking* have exploded in our society. The experience of the public appropriation and re-appropriation of the image then echoes the 'viral' historical survival of reproduction, as illustrated by Warburg (Schwendener, 2020). The syntax of his original image constellations has echoed down the decades to the digital image boards now found on all image-based social media platforms. The new tempo in which images afford new meanings within the constantly evolving context of the device and its platforms reflects the exponentially growing pace of the production and reproduction of recorded experiences in the present media moment.

### FRAGMENTATION THINKING

The discursive progression from the print to the post bookends my methodology for making. This oscillation from one extreme to another through retroactive interventions has imbued my practice with a greater understanding of the historicity of my present. By situating the tradition of printmaking within the technological eschatology of the present, I have discovered that the medium of my work has shifted from a disseminative tool to a conceptual one through the exponential capacity and demand for *technology for looking*.

In view of the capacity of the digital multiple to mediate the experience of the Event, I have sought to consider a historical perspective of this means of reproduction by drawing parallels between the print and the post, locating the *moment of compression* within the socio-political and cultural legacy of the printmaking tradition. By reflecting on the historicity of this precise moment in the course of this highly technological present, I have become more aware than ever before of my own dependency on the device for me to perceive and participate in the world. In my work, I turn to the materiality of printed reproduction as a means of interrogating the role of the image in mediating the historical Event, and thus I begin to understand the implications of the *technology for looking* as it exists on the device.

Through my work, I have sought to put the fixed image, as illustrated by Warburg, into motion through videography, questioning exactly how the technologically conditioned present is historicised. An ontological comprehension of the image as Event then becomes all the more crucial to gaining an understanding of the present as an immediate historical moment. An understanding of history, as a cultural reconstruction of the past in the present, is crucial if we are to truly interrogate the incisive legacy of the *technology for looking*. A bifocal lens of history is also integral to both a theoretical and a practical pursuit for alternative readings of the present. By bringing a historical perspective of the present into focus as a strategy for navigating the legacy of the Event, I hope to bring at least a trifle of understanding to my own experience of the present Event, as mediated through the image, by engaging in a ceaseless dialogue with the reproductions of the past.

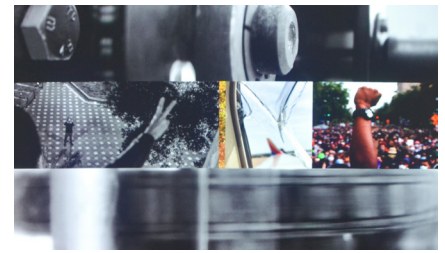


Figure 9

*As I leave the printing studio, I imagine traces of memory imbued in every object within it. Every scratch on the glass, every mark left by the tides of acid in the bath, the press with its blankets tucked in by inky fingerprints... I think of each hand that has buffed and burnished, pulled and torn, each mark made, each image patiently drawn out of the surface of the matrix. These objects—many of which seem unchanged from their first iteration over 600 years ago—have served riots, revolutions, and cultural movements. They have created pamphlets and posters for both sides of history. They produced propaganda for war and ideological dogmas. They have also facilitated the preservation of small moments of ‘being’—a portrait, a still life, a landscape. As I switch off the light to leave, I imagine the mechanisms of the studio coming to life in a rhythmic retelling of the past, present, and future.*



Figure 9

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Born in 1994, Adrian Ranger is a Cape Town based interdisciplinary artist and print scholar. Ranger trained at the University of Cape Town and received her BAFA and MFA with distinction from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, where she currently works as a part-time lecturer. She is the recipient of the Vice Chancellor Research Scholarship, Maclver Scholarship and the Katrine Harries Memorial Bursary. Ranger's practice-led research seeks to situate the emergence of the printmaking tradition - and the notion of the print as 'reproduction' - as a pivotal Event which once shaped a past era's perception of reality, just as the 'digital-multiple' template today functions as a contemporary reproduction of Being.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure titles and information

Figure 1: Post Print

Figure 2: Assemblage Thinking



Figure 3: Warburg Wall

Figure 4: Fragmented Studio



Figure 5: Fragmented Studio Installation

Figure 6: iPad Etching



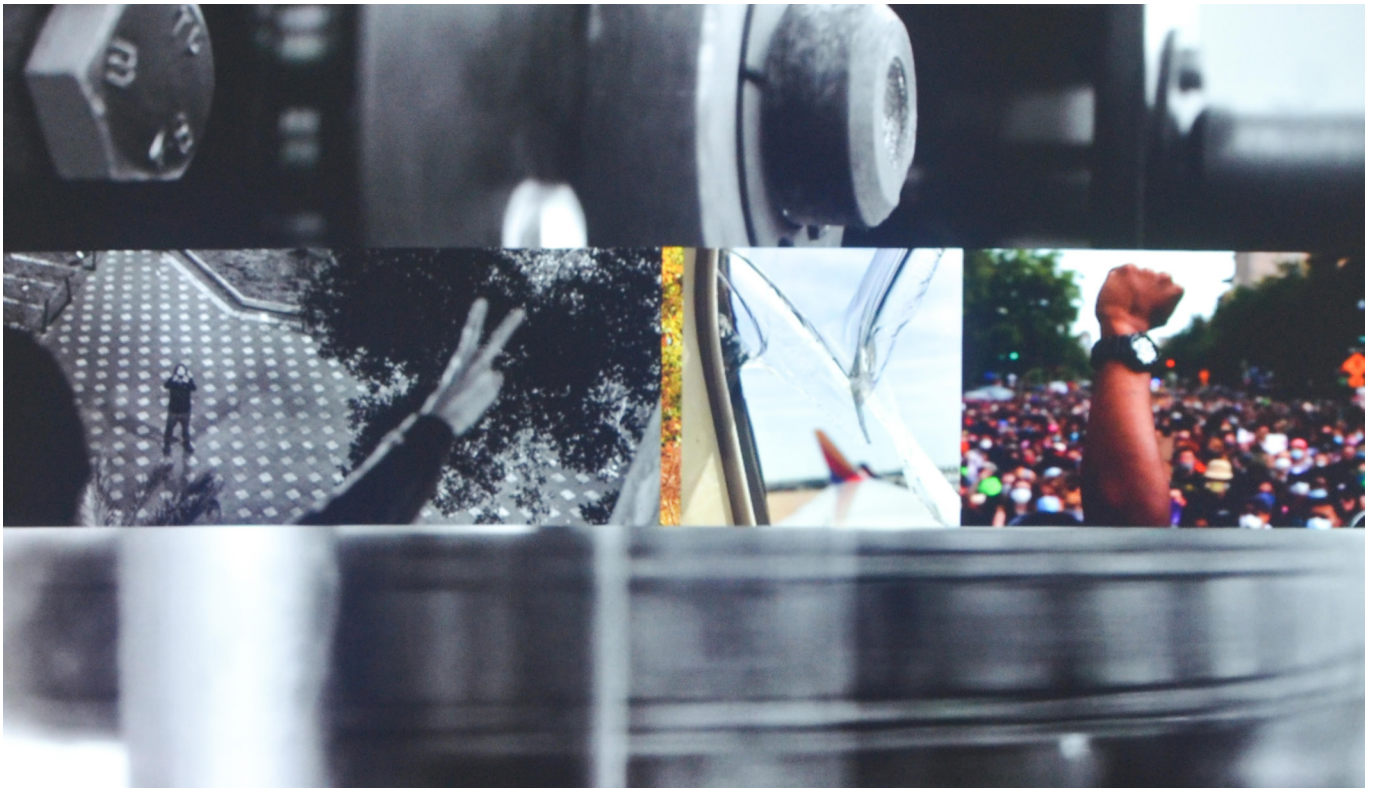


Figure 9: Image Machine (still)

Figure 10: Image Machine (still)