

THE SEMIOTIC SITUATION: SITUATING COLLABORATION WITH RAE-YEN SONG AT DUNDEE CONTEMPORARY ARTS PRINT STUDIO

Sandra De Rycker

In summer of 2021, a project began with Rae-Yen Song's visit to the Print Studio, our first collaboration in some time since the pandemic¹ began. Though social restrictions on how the spaces of the Print Studio were used continued, prioritising individual working and distance where possible, Song visited the Studio to begin conversations around print possibilities alongside a planned solo exhibition titled ▷▣●▷ in DCA's galleries.

These conversations began together with Annis Fitzhugh, Head of Print Studio at DCA, whose open-ended approach to collaborative experimentation in print as a method of invention is at the core of this research.² Song introduced key concepts of narrative agency over the familial oral histories, memories and mythologies behind the exhibition, a sculptural environment based on what Song described as an 'imagined dialogue with a long-departed grandfather...a being from another time and place, and my conversation with him addresses crossing, migration, loss, survival and labour' (Song, 2021a, p. 3).

The title of the exhibition ▷▣●▷, Song explained, consisted of four characters from the Hokkien dialect of the artist's mother's generation name. These symbols were to be echoed within the architectural structure of an 'ambiguous creature' in the galleries, with elements representing a 'head, a body, bones and organs' (Song, 2021b).

Central to these ideas was a coin, an object passed down through generations from Song's maternal grandfather, a material representation of ancestral labour and value, something Song described as 'The only physical remnant of a life...an enduring, pocketed object; previously touched and felt – privately – in a distant land and another time, by him and countless others before' (Song, 2022).

From the outset, it was made clear that though this coin and its story remained central to Song's thinking, it was to remain private – removed and deliberately unseen. This emphasised instead the

concept and indirect recollection of its touch – a mode of interaction made more resonant by our recent experiences of social isolation³, during which our movements concerning one another and the surfaces that we touch were restricted.

These exchanges came at a time when my research, as a non-printmaker focusing on ethnographic principles and embedded observations of 'being there' within the Studio, had forced me to reflect upon what alternate perspectives the recently imposed 'distancing' might provide. As I listened and we talked, I considered the capacity of print, with its evocations of absence, and graphic traces of that which is just beyond our reach, to provoke imaginative dimensions, eliciting a textual response (Johannessen and Van Leeuwen, 2018) – a relational understanding and memory of contact or touch, a reading of that which is no longer there.⁴ Print is known for its implicit processes of presence and absence (Didi-Huberman, 2018). Each stage of production is a consideration of cause and effect, producing semiotic structures of relational value. In print collaborations at DCA, though the projected goal remains the printed artwork, it is the tactile matrix that leaves its imprint and, in the Studio, is most often the indirect interface around which the labour and dialogues of the Studio converge. Semiotic readings of printed artworks are too often foregrounded by the immediate surface of the artefact alone (Reeves, 1999; Pelzer-Montada, 2018; Balfour, 2020), sustaining a critical gap between the making and reading of printed images, de-emphasising the careful composition of graphic nuances that underpin the print, distinguishing it from other forms of visual art.

As such, this talk takes as a point of departure Halliday's theory of social semiotics, emphasising the significance of the 'semiotic situation' (Halliday, 1978), meaning shaped in situ, through the practice and discourse of the collaborative Studio. What characterises a social semiotic⁵ approach is its focus on the productive stages of semiosis⁶ – a semiotics of action through which, by its application to the practices of printmaking, we may reinstate the often

¹ The Covid-19 health pandemic from 2020 entailed building closures, home-working and 'furloughed' staff at times.

² Fitzhugh's reflections on recent artist collaborations, including Rae-Yen Song, can be read in Fitzhugh, A. (2022) 'We Are in Record. The Temporality of Print/Making', IMPACT 12: The Printmakers' Voices. Centre for Print Research (CFPR), University of the West of England, Bristol, 21-25 Sept 2022.

³ Government-imposed guidance at times entailing limited numbers of people in shared spaces, two-metre distancing between individuals not sharing a household, and additional cleaning regimes for shared surfaces and equipment.

⁴ A similar implicit reading of the graphic is explored in Roca, J. (2020) 'The graphic unconscious or the how and why of a print triennial (2011)', in Pelzer-Montada, R. (ed.) Manchester University Press, p. 95.

⁵ A term largely attributed to the writings of M. A. K. Halliday, having evolved within studies of multimodality in recent years.

⁶ Defined by G. R. Kress (2010) and others as the process of making signs and meaning.

underacknowledged connection between print processes and their resulting forms, and the significance of the interface through touch. More recent developments stemming from Halliday's theory (Gunther Kress, 2010; Hodge, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2022) focusing on socially shaped 'sign-making rather than sign use' (Gunther Kress, 2010, p. 54) extend these ideas to encompass not just verbal or textual but material and visual modes⁷ of meaning and beyond. A 'unified and unifying semiotics' (Gunther R. Kress, 2001, p. 2) is perhaps unconsciously familiar to most in this digital age in which different modes are frequently represented within one unified interface, where, as Kress explains, we may ask ourselves "Shall I express this with sound or music?, 'Shall I say this visually or verbally?" (Gunther R. Kress, 2001, p. 2).



Figure 1

Approaching collaborative printmaking as a composite series of multimodal interactions allows us to emphasise not just the printed artefact but the many voices of the situated discourse of the Studio: the playful selection, layered composition, materials and techniques that are tacitly interconnected with the surface of the print. A multimodal approach may offer to printmaking what Kress describes as 'the element that has so far been missing from the equation: the semiotic rather than the technical element,' alone, that is, 'the question of how this technical possibility can be made to work semiotically' (Gunther R. Kress, 2001, p. 2) – an endeavour with which most printmakers will be familiar.

Song explained plans for the coin to be represented by a circular motif at the centre of the exhibition, a wooden structure covered with abstract symbols and unknown language, revolving, non-linear, and deliberately ambiguous. As conversations evolved, Fitzhugh began to talk through different print possibilities that might correspond with Song's initial ideas. The qualities and properties of Takuhon printing were introduced, and samples from the Studio were shown to Song, outlining this ancient method from China and its capacity to create a positive, sculptural imprint of three-dimensional forms (Fig. 1).

Song demonstrated an intrinsic understanding of the duality of print and its referential qualities through its relevance to the ambiguity of storytelling, translation, and language. Through the dialogue about Takuhon, beautifully evocative of the tactile interface of the print process, this understanding evolved towards a more sculptural ideology of print as both action and artefact:

"... there's something fossil-like about it, or it's like a mummification of the original...a ghost of it...something tangible, fleshy to it. And this is the ghost of that...a positive of something that isn't actually there, but the mask of it is there" (Song, 2021c).

The familiar negotiation of retention and removal threaded through the processes of print is present even at this emergent stage. Such dialogue demonstrates a negotiation between the artist's concepts and the resources of the Studio, towards a mutual understanding – a shared register⁸ – that allows collaborative exploration of meaning potential through the transformation of various processes and materials. With a focus on play and variation through different modes, Takuhon printing,

7. From modality; a term used in social semiotics to describe the representational outcome of material that has been shaped and encoded with meaning by its users in a given cultural context (e.g., speech, colour, gesture, photographic images).

8 A term used in social semiotic theory to describe the shared understanding in a particular cultural context which allows users to understand, and anticipate, nuanced meaning in situ.

Figure 1: Samples of Takuhon printing from DCA Print Studio (Photo: Judith Burbidge)

for example, may become an exploration of memory or a graphic imprint may evoke an ancestral ghost.

As Song related these concepts of presence and absence to the ceramics cast for the exhibition, the dialogue shifted to the experience of revealing the print as it emerges from the press, finding parallels with the disclosures of the ceramic kiln when objects emerge from the mould after firing.

Fitzhugh – ...that's what I was talking about, that indirectness as well. When you pick up a paintbrush and make a mark – that's it. It's right or it's wrong, change it...but when you do a print, all this work has happened and then this, almost, final thing appears!

Song – Yes, definitely. I've heard that about ceramics as well, you never know what you're going to find. I've heard of the kiln gods! (laughter)

Fitzhugh – Yes, we have print gremlins! (laughter) In fact, in early print history, the printer's assistant was called the 'printer's devil'...Yes, and there was a printer's imp as well.

Song – A printer's imp!

This comparison of the semiotic possibilities of the printing press and ceramic mould demonstrates not just the formulation of a working understanding but the incorporation of vocabulary from Song's practice, with all its 'ambiguous creatures' and equivocal characters, which developed and continued throughout the collaboration. This analogy was consistent with the idea of the coin as a 'physical remnant' of past labour and of the visible artefact comprising only a small proportion of the many actions, gestures and materials from which it was made. Through comparison of the structure of contact between indirect labour and the resulting artefact, a mutual understanding developed of print's capacity to reveal textural information transferred through touch, towards the final output, revealing information previously invisible to the eye.

Work began on creating what was referred to as the 'coin', made using a laser-cut piece of Japanese plywood chosen for its visible woodgrain, initially conceived as a component to be assembled with other sculptural parts in the centre of the gallery installation. The ideas that emerged from Takuhon producing what Song called a 'ghost' of a sculptural object provoked the question of taking a print directly from this laser-cut woodblock. Though Takuhon was not used at this stage, its suggestion of a sculptural imprint or paper 'shroud' carried through (Fig. 2).

Decisions were made not to replicate another woodblock solely for the print edition, embodying the ambiguity Song spoke of, as the woodblock took on the role of both the print matrix and the sculptural component of the exhibition (De Rycker, 2021).⁹ Though logistically complicated, not least in terms of transferring overlapping sculptural

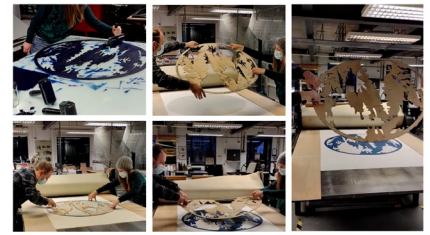


Figure 2

⁹ The matrix, carrying its etymological associations with the maternal familial lineage, further resonates with Song's ancestral narratives. This idea is explored more fully by Reeves (1999) and De Rycker (2021).

Figure 2: Scott Hudson and Claire McVinnie during print development process for Rae-Yen Song print editions

pieces to a two-dimensional plane, this retained the relational connection to the matrix through its direct imprint of textural details from the sculptural 'coin'. As the prints emerged, carrying the traces of the woodgrain, these editions were collectively referred to as 'ghosts' of the coin, eventually taking the title *ah kong --ghost--* (Fig. 3).



Figure 3

As a dynamic, multi-layered practice, printmaking generates composite objects; the printed artefact often results from the separation and integration of many parts. These junctions of print practice are often understated in favour of the integrity and value of the completed print. However, it is the fact that print production can be split into many semiotic resources allowing transitions - or transductions¹⁰ (Bezemer and Kress, 2015) - from one mode to another during experimentation that is so productive. This permits us to observe transformations that reveal previously unseen qualities. Collaborative selection is based on such observations, and their correspondence with the artist's concepts. An understanding of the critical value of such transductions is something established early on in conversations with Song:



Figure 4

I love how colours become labour... the idea of these layers echoing the different layers of someone's life ... the process of printing intrinsically speaking of the work that it's talking about (Song, 2021c).

During social restrictions at DCA, these adaptable layers were drawn upon to enable continuity of production, splitting development into different stages to enable multiple contributors, working individually in the Studio where possible, to adhere to ongoing guidance for social distancing. When Song was absent from the Studio, development was entrusted to skilled printers, conversing at a distance with the artist and other staff, neither having access to the work in its entirety, but working within a shared understanding and constant dialogue around the artist's conceptual framework. Through a multimodal lens, this mutual intentionality and anticipation of meaning that develops between publisher, artist and printers can be seen to have its own form, structure and pattern - the implicit semiotic situation, exemplified here by the familial resonance echoed through relational layers and the representative impression of the coin.

After much experimentation, the 'ambiguous creatures' designed by Song were produced using photo-etched copper plates, similarly evolving into a hybrid role of print matrix and sculptural element as the collaboration expanded to make further editions using copper plate etching. The etched copper is again reminiscent of the representative value and stories connected to Song's grandfather through the unseen coin (Fig. 4).

The prints from these copper creatures were named 𠄎 vessel 𠄎, suggestive of an open-ended carrier of meaning, a codex or scroll vertically unfurling. The four components correspond to the four characters in Song's exhibition title, simultaneously represented by the four architectural components in the gallery space and echoing Song's assertion of a creative 'register' in which '...these sort of shrines elsewhere... they all carry the same...emblem almost...having the

Figure 3: Rae-Yen Song, 'ah kong --ghost--', 2022. Laser-cut woodblock print with screen-printing and additions of embossing powders and holographic vinyl on Somerset Velvet White 400gsm paper, 99 x 101.4cm, edition of 5.
Figure 4: Photo etched copper plates during development process for Rae-Yen Song print editions.

¹⁰ Moving semiotic material from one mode to another, for example, from speech to drawing or from sculpture to digital image.

same print but in different places but still kind of speaking the same language'(Song, 2021c).

As with the 'transduction' of the textured woodblock matrix for *ah kong --ghost--* from sculpture to the two-dimensional plane, some modes of communicating from a distance without direct contact with the material resources became inherently complicated. The choice of paper substrate for *vesse*, ultimately a semi-translucent and fibrous Japanese paper such as those used for Takuhon, was of critical importance as a tactile interface that could carry the ancestral implications and intricate embossing of the copper creatures. During experimentation, samples were shipped to Song to enable a response to the textural dimensions of the paper that was impossible to achieve digitally.

The records of such communications during restricted contact highlight the tension and difficulty of creative development of the print without the interface of touch. This was underlined by the time-bound production of *ah kong --ghost--* and *vesse* before their matrices were integrated with the gallery installation. The impossibility of completing these textural stages remotely reinforces the problematic hierarchy of the print as a standalone object. Prints are intrinsically complicated, bound up with and materially interconnected with the texture of the matrix. Connected through the agency of our hands or even mouths, with or without the aid of tools or instruments, ultimately the print cannot evolve without a transformative semiotic of touch.

As Van Leeuwen asserts,

...All sensations can be "passive" or "active."...there remains a difference between, one the one hand, sight, sounds and smell, and on the other hand, touch and taste...Material objects we can see, but not change with our eyes;...Perceiving texture is always an interaction between particular actions and particular material qualities... material qualities derive, as often as not from social practices of transforming materials. They are socially produced (Van Leeuwen, 2022, pp. 98-99).

This reminds us that the implicit mode of touch behind each imprint is active and therefore socially generated. This active potential for creative transformation is at the core of social semiotics, emphasising the textural qualities over the textual in print – a call to move past the textual bias in 'graphic trace-making' (Thibault, 2018, p. 46). In collaborative printmaking, this reinforces the need for social context to enhance creative understanding. Only in conjunction with the dynamic and generative stages of print collaboration can its meaning-potential be fully explored.

The experiential difference inherent in solely digital communications around material production was foregrounded by Kress long before the pandemic. Kress suggested that

...ubiquitous access to the Web...eliminates the need of moving semiotic materials...transducting meanings from one mode to another...More and

more, representations are selected and re-used in different contexts rather than...produced for each new context (Gunther Kress, 2010, p. 190).

The productive value of such transitions is demonstrated throughout Song's collaboration, for example, by the shifting evolution of the coin. The difficulty of communicating without touch, through digital means alone at points, emphasises the significance of multimodal transfers during production as a constituent of such dialogue. Sustained replication of materials through one interface, at a 'social distance'¹¹ from the Studio, entails a loss of creative potential, as our understanding of the effects of touch in relation to what we see becomes ever more distant. In other words, for the indexical traces on the surface of Song's prints to be understood as textural implies a referential acknowledgement of the experiential concerning the material matrix. Like Song, we might adjust our methods to encompass this more tactile understanding of print's creative language, beyond dominant systems of narrative.

As the completion of Song's prints approached, what had begun as a practical possibility to contend with the possible recurrence of closures again became part of this situated vocabulary: consideration had been given to a woodblock stamp designed to replicate Song's signature, like a publisher's chop mark, embellished upon the prints, with the artist at a distance, to confer authorship and authentication within the edition.

Though this was not necessary, and Song could return to the Studio as the project evolved, able to be fully present for the finalisation of the editions, this method was ultimately retained for the signing of 𠄎 vessel 𠄎. Returning to the Takuhon process that had helped formulate Song's understanding of print's conceptual potential, a piece of laser-engraved plywood was used to create a Takuhon 'ghost' of the artist's signature: not just a semiotic evocation of memory and familial ancestry but a direct textural lineage encompassing the collaborative authorial act (Fig. 5).

Such 'ambiguous' practices are threaded through print, from private and ephemeral deliberations to the open-ended index on the gallery wall. This period of juggling the proliferation of digital communications alongside material experimentation was a reminder of the dialogic stages of print that must happen through direct contact, not just a replication of an image but sensory and tactile, sculpturally and socially evolved.

Finally, the shifting story of Song's grandfather, his coin and its trajectory demonstrates not one story of history and authorship but the cumulative value of its evolution between many modes, complex, social, a multimodal lineage bound up between one thing and another.

The semiotic situation of print lies not just within the walls of the Studio but in the unifying understanding that shapes and re-shapes the collaborative creation at its core, transducing and always returning to implicit materiality – perpetually interconnected through a legacy of touch.



Figure 5

¹¹ 'Social distance' is a term commonly used during the pandemic to emphasise physical distance from other people and restricted physical contact with shared tools and surfaces.

Figure 5: Rae-Yen Song, 𠄎 vessel 𠄎 2022
Four plate copper etching on Atsu-Shi 76gsm paper,
66 x 25cm, edition of 20.

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With a background of working closely with artists in the production, exhibition and documentation of contemporary art, before coming to DCA she worked at the Rosenthal Centre for Contemporary Art (Contemporary Arts Centre) Cincinnati (USA) and at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Now based within the Print Studio facilities at DCA, her research uses ethnographic and socio-semiotic perspectives to highlight the agency and significance of collaborative processes and dialogues within the Print Studio environment, during the stages of print development and production.

During the last IMPACT11 conference, Sandra co-presented a conversation with Annis Fitzhugh (Head of Print Studio, DCA) and a paper on DCA's print collaboration with Alberta Whittle, Scotland's 2022 representative at the Venice Biennale. She presented at the Association of Print Scholars panel 'The Graphic Conscience' at the 109th CAA Annual Conference in 2021 and is a representative on the SGSAH doctoral research committee and Cultural and Museum Studies Discipline + Catalyst.

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IMAGE GALLERY

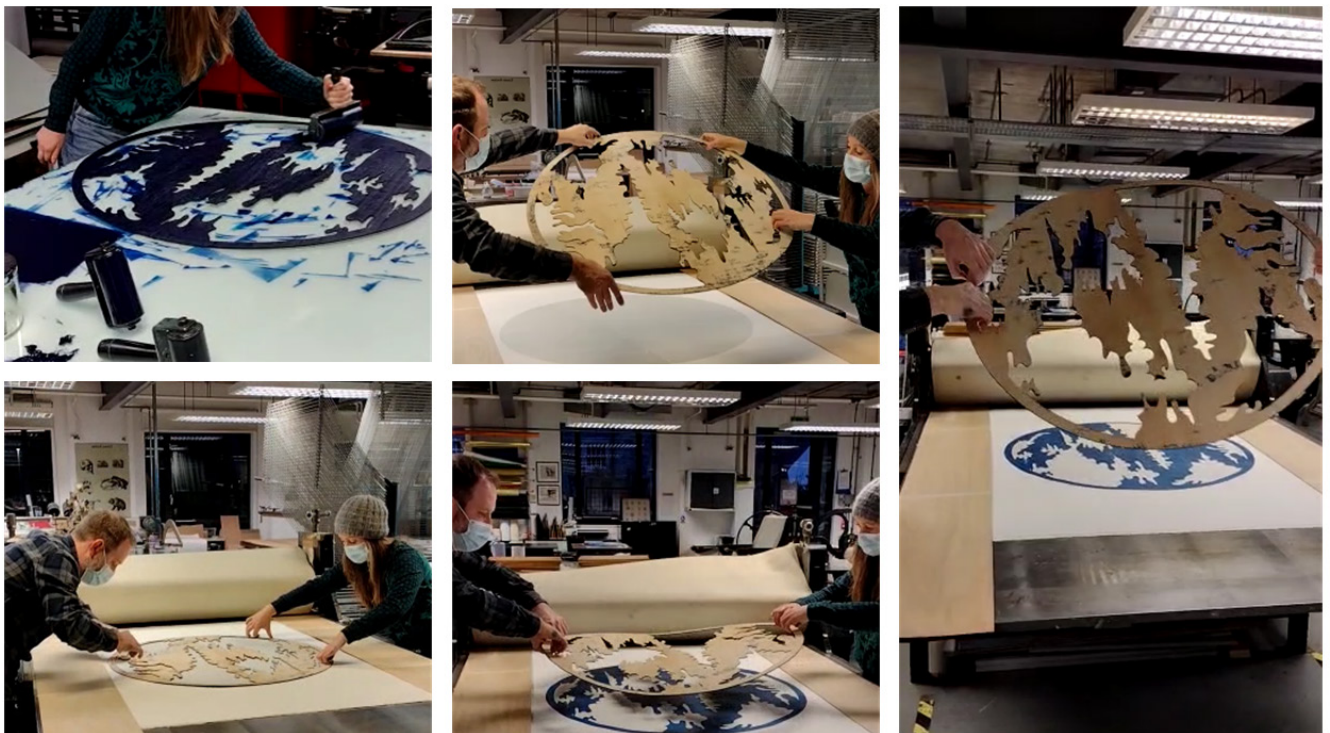


Figure 1: Samples of Takuhon printing from DCA Print Studio (Photo: Judith Burbidge)

Figure 2: Scott Hudson and Claire McVinnie during print development process for Rae-Yen Song print editions



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