

Denise Hawrycio and the Imprint of Engagement and Indifference

Denise Hawrycio has used a variety of media over the past twenty-five years, including video installations and photography. But the foundation of her practice, continued from the beginning to the present, is printmaking. Printmaking, like painting, is one of the media that is both in the foreground and the background of much contemporary art. Like painting, it carries with it the burden of the appearance of outmoded technique. On the other hand, both painting and printmaking have unique qualities that respond to current objectives in much contemporary art, particularly in their ability to carry a direct representation of "touch," especially in the case of painting, and "imprint," which is particular to printmaking. I define "touch" as that direct inscription of the hand of the artist in the material, and "imprint" as the direct impression of objects or representations or gestures into a transferable material. Hawrycio's printmaking makes strong and specific use of both of these aspects, both as an attraction and as a refusal.

But much contemporary work is torn between the continuation of "romantic" attitudes of unique personal expression conveyed by these techniques that emphasize the hand of the artist, the signifying gesture, and those more generic, mechanical and impersonal approaches that dominate the mass cultural landscape. Although aesthetic motivations are still mostly distinguished and legitimated by their historical position as personal expression, this is opposed by certain provocative attitudes of avant-garde art, which rejects traditional aesthetic approaches in favour of more modern, or perhaps postmodern,

impersonal processes. Like many artists of her generation, Hawrycio had to negotiate her attraction to traditional mediums in relation to issues that came out of conceptual art in the late 1960s and 1970s. After conceptual art, these traditional mediums could not be taken for granted. Artists had to respond to certain critical formulations that challenged the notions of "touch" and "imprint" that preoccupied gestural painting throughout the modern period. This was central to the struggle between neo-expressionist painting and postconceptual, critical photographic practices of the early 1980s. Despite the rapprochement that has followed since then, it is likely that this struggle is not yet, nor perhaps ever need be, resolved. In any case, it continues to influence artistic choices. Hawrycio's printmaking reflects the conundrums of this historical situation. Nevertheless, this is what makes her work interesting.

Hawrycio's decision to continue with imagery saturated in "imprint" and "touch" is strengthened by her entanglement with critical conceptualism, both as an aesthetic attitude and as politics. She has attempted to overcome the potential *recherché* appearance of printmaking as a medium by employing a variety of interactive processes to generate imagery and content. This simultaneously gives her work the cogency that situates it in a social context and capitalizes on the possibilities of gesture. But these interactive processes, these "engagements" with the world, are also a distancing mechanism. She has largely taken her own "hand" out of the arena of "touch" and substituted other personal or mechanical input. "Engagement" is beset by "indifference."

Marcel Duchamp in this sense is the originator of postconceptual painting. His strategy of "indifference" influenced directly or indirectly a chain of avant-garde technical strategies such as the "drip" method of Jackson Pollock, the mechanically generated *linea* of Piero Manzoni, the "fire and wind" paintings of Yves Klein, the "piss" paintings of Andy Warhol, the "blind" drawings of Robert Morris, through to more recent strategies by Francis Alÿs, Alfred Oehlen and Daniel Richter, to name only a few; all of which combine, usually in a very impure way, performance and painting. The self-dramatizing gestures inherited from romantic, expressionistic painting are given a radical twist by essentially anarchistic, indifferent, mechanical and intentionally accidental methods, and effects that reject personal expression, yet mimic its appearance.

In the case of Hawrysiw's work, however, there is a narrative dimension and social content that takes her work beyond a merely anarchistic refusal of romantic engagement. But this narrative element is also indirect and given to processes over which she has no (or at least minimal) control. Her content seems to be largely about the removal of her persona from the work itself, and she dramatizes and ironizes this absence. They are more "event-structures" than pictures, since the image is generated more from a social situation filled with irony and alienation than as a pictorial concept per se. By giving the origination of imagery and content over to strangers, she has violated one of the sacrosanct values of romantic art. These works contain genuine examples of naïve art (some of the writing borders on illiteracy) represented within the framework of a self-conscious, postconceptual intellectualism. This is the conundrum of some of the best art today.

Hawrysió's "antiaesthetic" is loaded with social and psychological implications. One could say that by relinquishing her control over content and gesture itself, she has freed herself from "ego art" and "masterful intentions." By letting somatic restlessness trace "dream-shiftings" onto her etching plates (which are placed under the wheels of her bed at night), she has removed conscious will from artistic intention. These "plates," in which hallucinogenic imagery is inscribed, become memory traces of "real" phantasms. Her "abstractions," in this sense, are generated by means that are other than aesthetic and arrive at compositions that are indifferently "natural." Is then Hawrysió essentially an "abstract" artist, in the sense that the individualistic will of the artist is "abstracted" or removed from the generation of the inner artistic content of this work?

Conversely, the intention of the work, as indirect as it may initially appear, is nevertheless quite precise. By specifically choosing people who are themselves naïve or indifferent to aesthetics to arbitrarily introduce their drawn images and messages onto the etching plate, she introduces an ambient, almost uncommitted, relation to the social world. Each plate is subtitled with a short, often ironic, narrative, in which artistic transgression is saturated with charm. Nevertheless, the imagery is not independent of the method by which it was generated. In fact, it clings to it. The critical effect of these works, the confounding of our expectations, is based on the latent discrepancy, the almost absurdist relation, between image and text, between engagement and indifference. They are as much a joke about the historical conundrums of artistic technique, as they are about social emancipation or creativity and the unconscious. This complexity of intention and effect is the radical strength of the work.