# How have artists responded to political and social developments?

## An exhibition at International Print Center New York

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News/Prints: Printmaking and the Newspaper*, at International Print Center New York, until October 19, curated by Anders Bergstrom and Anne LaFond*

*News/Prints*, on display until October 19 at International Print Center New York, explores the relationship between the newspaper and printmakers—and by extension, how artists are responding and might respond critically to current world events.

For an exhibition in a modest space, the range of content, styles and approaches that curators Anders Bergstrom and Anne LaFond have brought together is remarkable. Simply investigating the history and background of each individual work could occupy an entire day.

Every major form of printmaking is covered—etching, lithography, screenprints, woodcuts, and a range of other techniques. In these various works, artists draw realistically, in cartoon forms, abstractly or with experimental and unique techniques. Many works feature careful and considered use of text as part of the image.

For visual artists responding to political and social developments, printmaking is one of the fastest and most accessible mediums available. The oldest piece in the show, a woodcut illustration of the Battle of Szigetvar, fought between forces of the Ottoman Empire and the Hapsburg Monarchy near the present Hungarian-Croatian border, was published in the German *Neue Zeitung* newsbook on August 21, 1566.

The battle itself, an extended siege, took place between August 5 and September 8, 1566, meaning the woodcut was published as the conflict was still ongoing.

With such rapid turnover, prints were widely used by newspapers as graphic content. While this everyday, commercial use may not be considered especially artistic, the *News/Prints* exhibition has extracted a fascinating sample of a noteworthy image in a newspaper. On the pages of Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* from May 9, 1754, we see Franklin's small woodcut *Join or Die* urging unity of the American colonies with a simple image and bold text, some twenty years before the American Revolution.

Color woodblock prints from 1874 by Yoshiiku Utagawa, printed in the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Newspaper*, are so illustrious and dramatic that the newspaper text is relegated to a distant background. Similarly, *El Boletin Banquete Macabro*, by Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), features his folk art-influenced, darkly comic images known for ridiculing those in power.

The immensely prolific, 19th century French artist Honoré Daumier produced thousands of prints and drawings for publication, as well as paintings and sculptures. His scathing images of corrupt and criminal bourgeois society pinned certain enduring social types, making them pleasantly (or painfully) contemporary.

The prints also gained enemies for the artists. Daumier's *À Naples—Mazza, mon ami Mazza ..., ne vois-tu rien venir?* [*In Naples—Mazza, my friend Mazza …, do you see anything coming?*, 1856] ridicules Napoleon III's Bourbon cousin who ruled Naples with brutal suppression of political opposition. Text in the lower right is a censor's seal; it was never even allowed to appear in the newspaper.

In European "fine arts" at the time, academic schools of painting and sculpture were undergoing a challenge from new forms as popular revolutions against monarchy swept the continent. Édouard Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*(1868-69) is a striking lithograph that exemplifies departures from traditional methods and a close connection to events. The remarkable work depicts the execution of Maximilian, the younger brother of Austria's Franz Joseph I, who French emperor Napoleon III installed in Mexico as his puppet. When popular armed resistance threatened Maximilian's despotic rule, Napoleon III withdrew French troops to save face domestically. Isolated, Maximilian was captured and executed on June 19, 1867.

Manet responded to the news in several works that changed as additional facts emerged and as the painter's

own estimation of the event altered. His first painting shows Mexican forces carrying out the execution, while his next paintings and the lithograph itself suggest, symbolically, that French forces were the real executioners. The victims are hauntingly vague, the guns and violence are painfully compressed and an officer, fashioned after Napoleon III himself, demonstrates a disturbing calm as he readies his weapon for the final shot.

In a true mark of how timely and politically subversive the print was, French censors confiscated the stone Manet drew the image on after they saw a proof. Manet protested and was eventually able to have it returned. The curators explain that this saga of social criticism and its repression was the origin of their idea for the show.

Viewing far more recent artwork, Post-World War II and contemporary prints, one sees artists using a much wider variety of techniques and approaches, including comments on the very nature of news, historical interpretations and more personal and subjective responses.

In *Untitled (Newspaper bird for cover of XXe Siècle,* 1955), Georges Braque shapes the news of the Algerian Revolution into a dove atop a pleasing blue, but the fierce diagonal lines cutting through suggest entrapment or repression.

Selections from Vijay Kumar's *Untitled (from India Portfolio,* 1992) show chaotic, shadow-like figures invading the space of *New York Times* headlines about communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. The loose and aggressive handmade marks contrast with the mechanized type of the newspaper to indicate the artist's own thoughts (and memories) of the tragic events.

Artists exploring history include Yuri Avvakumov, whose *Tribune for a Leninist 1988-92* (1993) superimposes a design of his own architectural style (reminiscent of early Soviet Constructivism) atop the last edition of *Pravda*, the Soviet newspaper. Glenn Ligon's lithograph *Untitled from Runaways* (1993) presents a drawing of a runaway slave in the style of a newspaper ad, except the description is of Ligon himself. The original illustration from the *Southern Citizen* newspaper in 1838 is available nearby, providing a mundane presentation of horrifying material.

Medium and content are closely aligned in Miguel A. Aragon's *Letrero* (from *The Jaurez Series*, 2012). Newspaper images of the victims of Mexican drug violence are separated into layers and burnt, so that ashes provide the only pigment. Once run through a press, the result is a ghostly, delicate image, even as the ashes suggest the violence and pain of what has taken place.

Robert Rauschenberg's *Surface Series from Currents* (1970) inverts newspaper clippings to present a dark field where only fragments of white text stand out, giving a general sense of hopelessly confusing information. More recently, Kyle Tata's *7 Days of News (from Baltimore Sun Newspaper)* (2013), leaves nothing legible behind after seven days of news are superimposed in the same space. *Women can't be Artists* (2013) by Ruth Lingen presents only newspaper-formatted text in two columns where the only hint of art is the absurdity of the text itself (an actual claim made by a Boston neurologist in 1910), which asserts modern science proves that women have no aesthetic sense.

Several other modern works toy with the text and printed presentation of the news to question the validity of the information, without instructing the viewer as to which information is actually valid. Other artists manipulate the news format to reveal what is going on, despite misinformation. *Boom!: Boom* (2001), by American artist Dread Scott, is a striking juxtaposition of content and color. The red, pointed barrels of armed guerillas overlay blue text and images of surging Wall Street profits; at center in yellow is the word "BOOM." The combination effectively conveys a link between surging, chaotic financial profits and global war and instability.

Atop a gleaming aluminum plate of headlines of war and economic chaos, Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled* (2007) simply states in big, blue type: "THE DAYS OF THIS SOCIETY IS NUMBERED."

In *4,000 US Deaths And Just a Handful Of Public Images, Newspapers and Flowers* (2010), Becca Albee places an image of flowers directly onto a newspaper next to news of censorship of US deaths in foreign wars, emphasizing the suppression of the death toll while commemorating the victims.

The exceptional historical artwork is reason enough to see *News/Prints*. However, by placing contemporary work alongside it, the curators help illuminate how the artistic response to and thinking about major news stories and events have evolved—and, in the process, point to certain contemporary artists who are trying to respond to the political and social problems of our time.

*Exhibition*: http://www.ipcny.org/node/2218

*An online catalogue of the exhibition is available here:* http://www.ipcny.org/node/2165