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The mark and the act of impregnating

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Abstract: This article looks into poetic construction from the idea of “mark” as an act of impregnation. It presents reports on graphic processes resulting from artist residencies in which poetic and documentary actions were developed that relate the mark as a form of impregnation for approximations with the landscape in unknown territories.

Keywords: Mark. Graphic processes. Multiple. Landscape. Printmaking.

This text begins with a reflection on the use of the word “mark”, considering some meanings related to our object of study, i.e. graphic processes.

Our everyday use of the word “mark” resulted in a rather suggestive list that points to it as a groove, a fissure, a drawing, a signal resulting from an action over a substrate. It is also important to emphasize that a “*marca*” – Portuguese for both “mark” and “brand” – can be a symbolic representation of an organization, an institution, a company, a person, thus highlighting an aspect of possession or property identification.

What may seem as mere digression is due to the multiplicity of meanings, considering the history of graphic processes from which more specific disciplines such as graphic design, advertising, print media and so on would derive over time.

The idea of a mark as related to possession and belonging is complex because it asserts a notion not only of presence, of origin, but also of journey, due to changes undergone by a mark over time as a result of additions, subtractions, etc., which help us – or not – to track its function.

To reflect briefly on the issue, we can cite *ex-libris* or bookplates.¹ Besides being graphic elements per se, they are testimonies of other objects’ historicity – in this case, books – and

establish networks of functional contaminations within chains of historical graphic processes.

It can be very loosely inferred that the object, whatever it is, undergoes actions in a variety of manners, creating ways for obtaining non-verbal or physical-visual information that recounts, recalls, ascribes, reciprocates or consolidates aesthetic, historical, scientific and archaeological values.

The discussion reminds us of the foundational elements of graphic arts that are found in human being’s atavistic sense of producing signs and forms and which, in turn, aim at leading to the clues of material and symbolic existence, of beliefs and values, which contribute to metaphorically connect the mark to the act of impregnating.

The verb “to impregnate” provides a range of etymological possibilities for analyzing printed image not only as a cultural and technical element, which refers to the submission of a support to a matrix so that it can repeatedly transfer images, but also for the very polysemy of the term which, among many things, can infer three basic meanings.

The first meaning of “impregnating” is associated with the idea of contaminating or putting something in touch “with” – which in our technical case of printmaking is in its *modus operandi*, as mentioned before about impregnating the matrix with ink and transferring the latter to paper. It has the following synonyms: wetting, soaking, drenching, bathing, sopping, steeping, absorbing, saturating.

The second meaning would be related to the idea of “infiltrating gradually”, having as its synonyms: introducing, penetrating, pervading, taking over, filling, passing on. Finally, the third meaning – that of instilling – helps thinking of poetic processes, with synonyms such as: imbuing, instilling, instigating, inculcating, infusing (translated from DICIO, 2017).

Although the comment seems extremely generic, graphic history accompanies human movement and existence with regard to signic or symbolic forms of marking based on rituals and/or aesthetic and communicational processes since the original traces of human presence – like a millennia-old emblematic footprint impregnated in mud – to Pioneer Plaques and Voyager Golden Records thrown into space.

1. The existence of a bookplate plus an added one is valued by collectors or bibliophiles as a way of recognizing a book’s origin. There is also another facet of collectivism that is focused only on bookplate collection, considering their intrinsic value as works of art per se, because of authorship or even for recognizing the importance of the bibliophile’s “mark”.

According to “common sense” assertions, we must also assume that the smallest form of life, by its own inexorable existence, already imprints an indelible and indissoluble mark on the vital context of the environment. Such an assumption, of course, is of interest to art research because it contains reflections on mnemonic strata that lend themselves to mobilizing wonderings, emotions, sensations, and intuitions that work in a mass cultural order to reallocate it in another order, including as insight and as a hypothesis for new connections, as in a game – a very serious one, by the way – of what Nicolas Bourriaud (2009) proposes as “postproduction” structures and which we can present as a strategy for contemporary poetics.

According to Michel Paty (2003), ordinary experience – the one involved in our daily lives and driven by our senses and the way we solve and reflect on certain situations – may well conflict with the relational construction experience based on Bourriaud’s (2009) concept of “postproduction”, since Paty (2003) says in *A ciência e as idas e voltas do senso comum*², that the term “common sense” has much more powerful imbrications in sciences and life than the simplistic use given to it. Therefore, its “comings and goings” presuppose this unlikely relationship between “common sense” and “post-production”, considering that:

We cannot conceive understanding or communication without reference to common sense, which is a kind of fertile ground for our thinking and our actions. On the other hand, no new knowledge of some importance will emerge unless it goes beyond common sense and therefore breaks away from it. [...] We know of many cases in which really new knowledge comes about by displacing certain ideas earlier admitted as certain as a result of common sense – for instance, in mathematics or physics going from non-Euclidean geometries to quantum physics, and also in other disciplines such as evolutionary biology or molecular biology. Once assimilated and fully understandable, such ideas start to be taught and even spread, reaching the general public while providing the basis for moving toward knowledge that is even more innovative. A new “common sense” has been reconstituted from them, which is different from the one which preceded it but plays the same role in understanding and communication. Thus, common sense is enriched by the assimilation of scientific knowledge and by human experience as a whole. (PATY, 2003, p.9-10)

In this context, existing cultural forms, material uses, and the customs that invade our daily life can be re-engendered to

build other forms of thinking, which despite their pre-existence, acquire new meaning as a result of how they are reorganized. The memory of an existence – whether material, physical, spiritual, or otherwise – can be an integral or disposable part within such “post-production” aesthetics (BOURRIAUD, 2009).

Graphic arts appear as something that encompasses both notions of “common sense” and “post-production”, particularly because they are associated with daily life.

Every day we are affected by images at various levels, whether they are audiovisual or graphic. Supports for digital image, smartphones or tablets end up coexisting with the voracious return of the “analog” image or even of the digital image printed on a support as old and usual as paper, so that we may characterize this movement under the neologism “(photo)graphic” (ALMOZARA, 2015):

The juxtaposition of the terms “photo” and “graphic” is also a kind of subterfuge that seeks to highlight the links between printmaking techniques, new media related to digital prints, commercial/industrial graphics, the press, books – object book, artist’s book, etc. – and those media’s latent and sometimes not so obvious connection to photography, seeking an extension of the possibilities involved in establishing the work in consequent and inevitable processual “contaminations” to constitute the multiple, objects, installations and/or other procedures in which it is possible to find references or explicit use of the printed and/or technological image. Thus, “contaminations” are thought of as situations that evoke free transit between materiality and thinking, through which the processes establish themselves as poetic power in the face of a relational situation, connected to individual or collective historical and cultural propositions. (ALMOZARA, 2015, p.28-29)

The idea of impregnation proposed here stresses the aesthetic and cultural “act” by reminding us that graphic pieces have always been produced for the most distinct social functions. In its early days, relief printing was used to make playing cards, indulgences, illustrations. After the emergence of movable types and the printing press, book production, and the press as well as its association with printmaking became imbricated. Intaglio used in cartography and to produce scientific plates was important for maritime and scientific improvement, not to mention the publication of works in which some artists – paradigmatically Peter Paul Rubens (Siegen, 1577-Antwerp, 1640) – had printmaking facilities in their workshops to make “reproductions” of their own paintings for dissemination. With the emergence of lithography in the 19th century, the packaging and poster industries became

2. Conference at I Congresso Internacional de Divulgação Científica (UNESCO/ Associação Brasileira de Divulgação Científica – ABRADIC/Reitoria da USP). São Paulo, August 26-29, 2002.

popular. And in that very brief historical context we can foresee how printmaking in general played an essential role in mass communication. We now have the special possibility of foreseeing it as current language in contemporary productions that break away from categories of market-based appreciation linked to the support itself.

We can associate traditional printmaking and the processes of contemporary graphics to a marking and impregnation experience conditioned not only to a historical-temporal shift, but also to a historical-spatial one.

Just as steps “printed” and fossilized in mud indicated movements of prehistoric human groups, the trajectory and the experiences of displacement are crucial for thinking about the idea of mark and the act of impregnation as a way of belonging – regarding not only material goods as previously mentioned, but also social spaces, in what even concerns the displacement of the artists’ work space in developing their poetic productions.

Therefore, here the act of impregnation is “a two-way street”. We infect or contaminate an environment as much as we are contaminated or influenced by it.

The so-called “traditional” space of the workshop expanded and changed with the historical breakdown of the painting-sculpture “duopoly”. As a result, “artistic practices occur within a much broader range of activities” (ARCHER, 2001, p.1), in which traditional and non-traditional languages and procedures converse and are incorporated into the process. The place of production is thus emphasized as an element of experimentation as important as the language itself for contemporary art. The panorama of development of art practices is transformed and ends up encompassing trajectory as a hegemonic element when building aesthetic relations. The unfolding of such contact between artist and space is predominantly evidenced by the way graphic production can be perceived to assess and understand moments of confrontation and accommodation, that is, when space becomes place. According to that meaning, we may resort to the proposal of humanist geographer Livia de Oliveira when she says that place is “time in space, that is, place is placed time, because place, movement and matter occur between space and time” (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p.5).

For artists who strategically use trajectory as a poetic element and take graphic issues into consideration in their work, sketchbooks or artist’s books are supports that cause displacement to be experienced as a narrative of “placed time” (OLIVEIRA, 2012), which incorporates preparation of the trajectory, the experience itself, and future developments.

In order to recall one of the meanings of “impregnating”, the artist’s book “instigates” and “brings out” a “collection” or an “archive” for understanding space, which varies from verbal and/or visual narrative to the gathering of pieces that fit in their planned format: postcards, leaves, flowers, photographs, pamphlets, letters, maps, tickets, etc. and which are also mostly graphic elements. Therefore, we are traversed by printed image.

RESIDENCES: FLEUVE | RIO | RIVER | RÍO

To think about the mark and the act of impregnating through artistic practice, I present two experiences that influence the way I have been researching and perceiving printmaking issues beyond what is traditionally ascribed to them, aiming at a broader notion of the use of graphic processes.

These experiments were carried out during two artist’s residences – the first one in July 2011 at Atelier Presse Papier in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, Canada, and the second one in 2012, in Vila Nova de Cerveira, Minho, Northern Portugal, at Cerveira Biennial Foundation.

“Fleuve | Rio | River | Río” is a verbal and visual phrase that indicated a confluence that is typical of local geography and culture in Trois-Rivières, i.e. the presence of the river as a mark of encounter and also the linguistic aspects of the languages represented by locals and other artists present at the residence.

In Trois-Rivières, the project explored the relationship of specific elements in the landscape surrounding the place of the residence as a repository of aesthetic possibilities to be applied in graphic processes, involving photography and photogravure.

At that time, the idea was to conduct a visual study on certain of issues such as boundary, circumscription, appropriation of images, etc., and how these concepts could be explored in the process of immersion in a given territory.

At the artist's residence in Trois-Rivières, what struck me most was the location of the workshop – very close to the San Laurent River's banks. Based on that, I began taking a series of photographs and footage of surrounding points as boundary references.

Traffic signs, urban traffic marks, new and old maps, abandoned buildings resulted in notes and several photographic and audio-visual takes that became a collection of images and sounds. Pragmatically, since the residence at *Atelier Presse Papier* was placed in a context of printmaking, during those experiences of trajectory and collection of marks I produced four photogravure pieces that also recorded four different categories of signs and marks impregnated in the urban landscape and which indicated the displacement around the workshop (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Paula Almozara, 2011. Photogravures made as final work for the artist's residence at *Atelier Presse Papier*, Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada, July, 2011. Photo: Paula Almozara

In July 2012, at the artist's residence at Cerveira Biennial Foundation in Vila Nova de Cerveira, the words "Fleuve | Rio | River | Río" were still present in the conformation of the project and the process, obviously due to references to local cultural and geographical issues in which the river appears again as an adjunct.

Cerveira is located on the border of Portugal and Spain, and the Minho River is precisely the geographical mark of that territorial division, and that idea of boundary between countries made me question more emphatically the "common sense" idea of belonging: What does it mean to be foreign? Do I feel foreign?

During the process, I turned to the project notebook for

its links with the archiving of visual information, especially with greater attention to impregnation of specific marks of the geographic territory, turning the notebooks themselves into "places" of experimentation as cartographic elements.

Appropriation of the use of a geographical concept such as the territorial division caused by a river as a border marking created a paradox, an imaginary line permeable to the construction of a poetic "zone" of conflict, contradiction, but above all, of possible dialogues.

An emotional link between observer and space, anchored in the proposition of being and transforming space into place (OLIVEIRA, 2012) is an act of impregnation par excellence that pays attention to the marks, either physical or mental (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Paula Almozara, 2012. Detail of a production notebook for the artist's residency at Cerveira Biennial Foundation. Photo: Paula Almozara

The composition of project notebooks and notes, work-of-art-books, notebooks with a hybrid format that can be perceived as artist's books (Figure 3) were decisive in the final proposal for the residence: an audiovisual trilogy³ in which the images are derived and are completely anchored in graphic visuality.



Figure 3. Paula Almozara, 2012. Production notebooks for the artist's residency at Cerveira Biennial Foundation. Photo: Paula Almozara

3. The audiovisual trilogy can be seen at: [paisagem] [pensamento] <https://vimeo.com/46093518>; FLX | R <https://vimeo.com/46059916>; plein vent <https://vimeo.com/46100181>.

Research studies on art are notably open processes, showing a steady stream of ideas that have been “instilled” and “soaked” by ineffable marks on a long time scale reverberating into new acts.

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