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ARTIST

Margins

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Idea

Printmaking exists in the margins.

Plate 1—Environment

A. Square, the narrator of Edwin Abbot's 1884 novella *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, helps his readers envision his world by describing its inhabitants as "very much like shadows—only hard and with luminous edges" who "instead of remaining fixed in their places move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it."¹ These beings sound very much like the art world—this thing that is hard to identify and challenging to characterize, because it is always moving and we can never really rise above it to get a solid perspective upon it. We are drawn by its luminous edges, but it is hard to engage. Most artists can be found swarming around these edges. Printmakers see themselves on the periphery of this system, marginalized.

Plate 2—Multiples

In printmaking there are multiple originals. This creates questions for many artists and discomfort for viewers and buyers. The singular objectness of a painting or a sculpture works very well with our desire to place value, to possess. Benjamin's aura is resolute.² But what about the print? There are multiples. It is difficult for the public to place value, monetary and personal, on prints. Karen Kunc believes that in the art world print is the p word.³ Works that are sometimes clearly printed are not attributed as such. Images that have printed elements or have used printmaking processes do not list these in their media. This could be as benign as a choice by the artist to emphasize a media that he or she feels to be more primary or a desire for directness when excessive labeling could require extensive technical explanations. This could also be a calculated marketing decision to avoid associations with multiples, mechanized production, and media of lesser monetary value. Regardless, it is not unreasonable to be left with the impression that printedness is taboo.

Plate 3—Edges

In high school there was a small, tired etching press buried in the corner of the classroom, in the art center, on the edge of campus, near the woods. In college art was on the edge of campus in an old, albeit amazing, building, near the woods. Printmaking was subterranean. In graduate school art was slightly more towards the center, but printmaking was separated—on the edge, in an old TV repair shop, near the woods. This is a pattern that is not uncommon among printmaking areas, and for that matter, ceramic areas, too. These two areas are often placed in the margins.

Plate 4—Centre

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen discuss the idea of the centre—CENTRE—in their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. They define centre as the compositional choice to surround one essential element with others. The result is a radial type of balance where the centre "is presented as the nucleus of the information to which all the other elements are in some sense subservient."⁴ By signifying this concept with a less common spelling, they elevate it to a more erudite realm of ideas. When the subservient elements are labeled margins, with no special spelling, the hierarchy is cemented. The centre would not exist, however, without the margins. It is the margins that define the centre's relevance and importance. Without these supporting elements, the centre would be just another element itself.

Plate 5—Whole

For people of marginalized cultures the centre and the edge are extant, tangible places. bell hooks describes the global perspective that she gained growing up in the pre-civil rites era.

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.⁵

Plate 6—Open

Everything has the potential for meaning for children. When they look at an image, they observe, decode, read the entirety of the space with which they are presented. Unlike adults, they do not drive directly to the center for the meat of the page's meaning. Children's book authors and illustrators understand this interest in the whole and use it to enrich the depth of their narratives. Jan Brett's *The Mitten* is a wonderful example. Brett uses inset images to divide each page and simultaneously create a context for this folk tale, tell the story itself, and teach children about notions of past, present, and future. The edges of the page reflect the Ukrainian traditions of the story's origin. The central images are packed with detail illustrating the text below. The mitten shaped insets tell the reader, on the left, of a simultaneous, relevant narrative and, on the right, what will unfold on following pages. The centre and the margins transcend simple support of each other. Their relationship is a source of mutual enrichment that amplifies the resonance of the whole.

Plate 7—Page

Mark Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* tells the story of a family who moves into a house that is bigger internally than it is externally. There is a mania in Danielewski's exploration of the relationship between text and image with direct attention to the space of the page in this book. The word house is printed in blue, typefaces change, footnotes are used not only for explanations and citations, but also for lists and additional narratives. The structure of the page changes, the amount of text on a page increases and decreases, and traditional formats of the book are broken. Danielewski creates a terrifying tale and he uses the marks of his words to visually lead, confuse, and ensnare his viewer. This active manipulation of the whole page, the margins and the centre, leaves the reader wondering why we do not see this kind of experimentation more often. We are a culture dazed by the information explosion of the past 20. We are learning to step agilely between the margin and the center in search of perspective, trying to make sense, seeking new ways of understanding. This book explores how contemporary literature reflects this state through the activation of the margins and its resulting dialogue with the centre.

Plate 8—Avant-Garde

Avant-garde translates from the French to mean front edge. Arthur Danto describes the work of the artists in Linda Weintraub's 1996 book *Art On the Edge and Over* as intractably avant-garde. I like this idea, the possibility that Danto explores here—that there could be something so progressive that it could never be mainstream. If avant-garde is challenging content reflecting contemporary culture, skepticism in the art world, and confusion in the general public, then printmaking is intractably avant-garde. Printmaking is always on the edge for many reasons that I have already mentioned, but also because of the degree to which progressiveness in media and technology is integral to printmaking thought and process. As soon as new materials and technologies are available, whether related to art or not, printmakers are there ready to gather them into their oeuvre, especially if they have been otherwise abandoned.

Plate 9—Foundation

Printmakers are always broadening the possibilities of our media, but this openness also demands the need to continuously define our center, what Lucy Lippard would call our axis mundi, a "place to stand" or "something to hang on to,"⁶ a foundation to build upon. Printmaking has an engaging discourse of images, theoretical writings, and discussions. This discourse is, however, dispersed much the way we are most of the year. I believe that the call for a discourse for printmaking is because we feel the vitality of these times when we are together to exchange ideas and we want more. We do not lack a discourse; we desire that our discourse thrive without pause.

Plate 10—Point

Harry Nilsson's animated 1971 fable *The Point* tells of a world where everything is so insular that society has lost its way. Nothing moves in and nothing moves out; it is a world stuck in an unvarying cycle. Things begin to change when a small, pointless boy, named Oblio, and his dog, Arrow, are banished to the Pointless Forest for breaking the law that dictates that everything must have a point. On his adventures Oblio meets many outrageous characters who help him realize that everything has a point. When he returns with this message, there is suddenly a point in the Land of Point. It is simple and beautiful. If we want to grow, we have to be open. Sometimes you have to step from your center into the margins to gain perspective and understand what changes are necessary to effect progress. There is an ancillary breathing, a taking in and a letting out, that is

essential to the viability and growth of any organism or organization. In our case, we, printmakers, have to return from our centre back to our place in the margins, but we take with us ideas to consider, processes to tackle, a renewed energy to feed our work, and perhaps new drive to poke at that elusive centre with hard, luminous edges. These are our jobs; we are a vital part of the whole.

Print

Printmaking exists in the margins. This is where we want to be.

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¹ Edwin A. Abbot, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1984), 35.

² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Art and Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1992), 512-520.

³ Karen Kunc, interviewed March 2008.

⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 196.

⁵ bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Fergusson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 341.

⁶ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York, The New York Press, 1997), 27.

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