

Inkling: Thinking about Ink

Barbara Balfour

FULL STOP. PERIOD.

I know it's an unusual way to start a paper, with an ending, but my plan is to bring an image to mind of this punctuation mark.

It's also one of a group of simple axiomatic shapes, including a line and a cone, that the polymath and scientist Robert Hooke viewed under a high-powered microscope, and then committed to paper for his 1665 publication *Micrographia*. He described this printed mark, among others, as "smutty daubings on a matt or uneven floor", resembling "a great splatch of London dirt".¹

As Sean Silver notes in the online museum *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought*, from this point on,

Hooke begins to unpack a whole natural history of print. Close examination reveals traces of the paper-layer's trade, and the ink-maker's, signs of the founder's work in the irregularities of the type and of the printer's labor in the wear of a font which had no doubt been used and reused numerous times. There is no such thing as a period—at least not when seen through the microscope. There are only nodes in an unimaginably complex network of things. This is what can be liberated from a close look at even the most insignificant of signs.

Silver, S. (2016)

I'd like to examine a few transfers and transitions related to this process. Hooke's research, predating the use of photomicrographs in the 1830s by William Henry Fox Talbot and his contemporaries, led to his producing engravings to document subjects he viewed through the microscope. With its textured surface is reminiscent of Galileo's etchings of the moon; the full stop in *Micrographia* is laden with ink, with an irregular, almost hairy outer edge. A microcosm appears to be contained within this tiny dot, perhaps visually echoing the sense of 'micrographia' as 'tiny writing' or compact information.

Historian Anthony Grafton's 2020 publication *Inky*

Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe pays attention to the physical labours related to the scholarly pursuit of book publishing. Grafton argues for a view of humanism as deeply embodied, where "humanists were artisans as well as thinkers".³ (As an aside, I believe print-based artists would be happy to subscribe to the notion of a thinking artisan.) Grafton's emphasis on the physicality of publishing books is in sync with Sean Silver's close attention to signs of a larger sphere of industry found in the printed mark. In both cases, ink is the fulcrum – where design and craft intersect with a transfer of information, either textual or visual, or both.



Image 1



Image 2

Images: Barbara Balfour, ink draw-downs

In terms of my discussion here, whether it's a treatise or an artwork being printed, ink is both medium and matter, a mode of transmission and a physical substance. My focus on Hooke's full stop underlines how I want to think about ink. We can accept the grammatical and typographical usage of a printed period without dwelling too much on the ink that makes it visible and legible, just as we need to set aside too much of a focus on the material presence of fonts and typefaces to comprehend what we read. Sometimes, we even take for granted the ink and paper of which a print is comprised.

The fact of ink on paper might seem too obvious to mention, yet I have an inkling that it is worth revisiting and re-examining ink's material and haptic qualities in addition to, or even apart from, its visual presence. The labour and various physical and technical processes involved in making prints are well known to practitioners, yet arguably less well known to most art audiences. I feel that the inkiness of ink, its tactility and malleability, even its sheer messiness, are not so apparent to all. I believe an examination and articulation of the physical materiality of ink, what I think of as its 'inky ontology', merits consideration.

I decided to write this paper based on some inklings I have about ink. I also must admit, reluctantly, that the etymology of 'inkling', with intimations of hint, undertone, or suspicion, is not related to that of 'ink'. The Oxford English Dictionary details the origin of 'ink', from the Middle English enke or inke and Old French enque, via late Latin from Greek enkauston, which in turn denotes the purple ink used by Roman emperors for signatures, and is derived from enkaiein, or 'to burn in'.⁴

Something about the visual apprehension of ink.

Something about the haptic nature of ink.

Something about ink as a substance in and of itself.

Something about how printmakers are drawn to ink.

It's an inkling I have...

In the print studio, in tins or small quantities on a glass slab, ink appears wet and sometimes glossy. Printmakers might choose to work with ink by colour (which could be the entire topic for another paper) but when we mix ink or even remove ink straight from a tin, we inevitably deal with a physical substance. Whether full-bodied, viscous, loose, or buttery, we're dealing with a malleable substance that might be classified as a solid yet exhibits the qualities of a slow-moving liquid. It can be mixed and stretched out, it can run or relax, to varying degrees, and its stickiness almost goes without saying. This is from the point of view of the artist and/or printer who interacts with ink during the printing process before it's set to dry in a print.

At the point of reception, if I can jump ahead to the finished print, viewers will likely focus on the visual apprehension of ink, on what it looks like in its final state. And yet, I would argue that aspects of its physicality and its haptic qualities are still discernible by sight. This

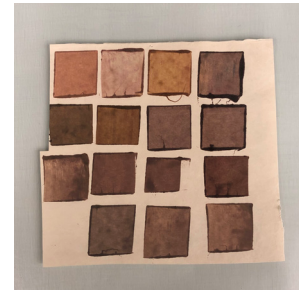


Image 3



Image 4

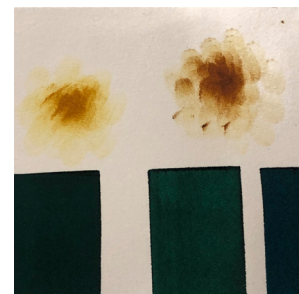


Image 5

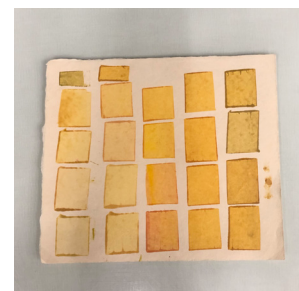


Image 6

was made salient during a critique this Fall in my artists' books and multiples class in the Print Media studios at York University in Toronto. Students were either new to print or had been away from printmaking for a year or more during the pandemic. I noticed how they were struck by the physical presence of ink on paper. Some wondered about how thick the ink layer was. They were drawn to touch the ink, to confirm the physical and sensuous qualities they perceived through sight. And since we were in a class setting, handling artists' books, they got to touch and feel the work.

Similar to the transitions I mentioned with Hooke's full stop – from lead type to printed impression to images viewed under a microscope through to its documentation by means of engraving — ink undergoes a few shapeshifting stages in the printing process. Printing ink is composed of pigments, originally derived from mulled minerals and animal and plant material, although increasingly synthetically produced, within a binding vehicle such as linseed oil or soy oil and resin. We could say that the ink carries the image, one that an artist has produced on a matrix, onto a substrate. Blind embossing is, of course, the exception, bypassing ink altogether, yet the typical print would include ink that reveals an intended image. Every time I write 'ink', I realise I could add an asterisk and list various alternatives like tomato sauce, for example, or even blood. And every time I write 'paper', I could suggest substitutes such as wood veneer, skin, or Silly Putty.

The ink on a finished print carries the mark of a drawing with litho crayons or carving by woodcutting tools, corresponds to an etched line or the open expanse of a screen, or reproduces a photographic or digital image. The process of printing makes the print, whether using a press or not, but it's the shapeshifting ink alone that travels from matrix to substrate, allowing for the image to materialise.

When printing, unless issues arise from the ink, one might not dwell on it specifically. But once a printing error arises, it's most often due to ink not being in the right place. In 2010, I curated a group exhibition called *Printing Errors*, concurrent with the Printopolis symposium held at Open Studio in Toronto. As we all know, to err is human and mistakes do happen.

One doesn't usually set out to make an error; it's more likely something to be avoided. In the fields of commercial and fine art printing, in particular, there is an underlying assumption of a correct way to print an image or text; accordingly, precision and flawlessness are held in high esteem. One usually holds one's breath as the printed image is revealed, followed by a discerning glance and an inevitable reckoning.

Works in this exhibition included errors of omission and mistakes corrected with typewriter opaquing film, along with signs of ink pooling at the bottom of a screen, registration errors, reversals one forgot would happen, or unintentional moiré effects. And, of course, the fingerprint you didn't want to have in your print. Some of the artists could reconcile the unintended results as 'happy accidents'; others considered them undesirable, exceptions to the rule.



Image 7



Image 8

In lithography, terms have evolved for the assessment of an edition, chiefly around flaws and errors. In the series *Petrification* (1997), I tried to visualise those qualities and states in works entitled *stretch*, *push* (about the displacement of ink in particular), *burnt*, *salty*, *ghost*, *hysteresis*, *bleed*, and *kiss* (when paper laid over an inked limestone picks up a partial imprint in addition to the intended image). Of course, when one chooses to make an error intentionally, it doesn't have quite the same charge (or sinking feeling).

In the series *Qualified Colours* (2012), I tried to envision in litho ink the colours the novelist David Foster Wallace described in words. Employing the practice of draw-downs, applying ink with an ink knife onto paper to check the density of colour, I made works on paper that aren't technically prints, but which I would argue are nonetheless printery. Working in the studios at York University, I was surrounded by students who kept remarking on what they recognised as preparation leading to printing. More than one student commented on how much printing I must be working up to; each of the sixty-six different draw-downs, grouped in colour sets, requires a fair bit of mixing to arrive at the desired shades, tints, and tones.

This project in particular is one that I remember in terms of the process involved. I got to mix various colours, ones I would never tend to make out of personal aesthetic choice. It might also have something to do with the fact that the colours were not imagined in terms of a final image, or as playing a role in layers of a multi-colour print. They had everything to do with ink as colour and with the limitless potential of mixing coloured ink. For the uninitiated, they could read as a colour exercise, even a didactic one; for print-based artists and those more familiar with print, they would read as evidence of a behind-the-scenes, in-the-studio process. For me, it was like trying to have a conversation with an author or at least engage in a kind of call-and-response about colours described and subjectively imagined (and I should point out, not always perceived in the same way by all viewers): the colour of pallid cheese, autumnal orange, the colour of really old olives, indecisive green, deep glowing neutron-blue, vague robin's egg, faint sick pink, furious purple, confectioner's rich brown, the colour of strong tea, the slightly sad colour of early winter P.M., clean-sheet-white, white of the grave, the white of long death, absolute blackness, bright-black, and black as ink. My personal favourite, the inkiest black, became the title of my accompanying artist's book.

I'd like to return to ink as ink and to a sculptural work by American sculptor Charles Ray. I saw this work, years ago, and retain a strong, visceral memory of it. In the gallery space, you would walk up to a large, dark-painted three-foot steel cube. With its glossy finish and austere geometry, this presents itself as a classic Minimalist work. At close range, the lustrous top face of the cube might at first appear in keeping with the hermetic nature of the entire form, unless some dust happened to fall upon it, disturbing the surface. Perhaps the meniscus could be detected in a slight curve of the surface of what is more liquid than solid. Or else, by visual discernment alone, you might realise that what you are looking at is a huge box full to the brim with black

printer's ink.

A paradigm shift occurs when you view Ink Box (1986), standing close to a substantial cube full of ink. How much would it weigh? One wouldn't want to plunge into it, or for it to escape its confines. It would make a huge mess; it could even be lethal. Suddenly what I am used to thinking of as the body of ink, the combination of its physical properties that I evaluate before printing – viscosity, tack, and length – confront me on a completely different scale, even if only in my imagination. I'm presenting this to you as a memory of my experience, but also as a thought experiment, similar to what one goes through in the presence of this sculptural work. It's primarily a mass of ink (with steel playing a supporting role, literally) that is apprehended visually and understood on a more visceral level.

From this large mass of ink, I'll shift scale and return to Hooke's full stop, his inky period. This is among one of the smallest iterations of ink that can be produced unless we move into the realm of nanofabrication. In Dip-Pen Nanolithography, or DPN, molecules of ink are manipulated to build up nanostructures. I came upon mention of this technology when I tried to research 'ink theory', a field that doesn't exist. Further searches for 'ink theory' will lead you to the classically-trained, all-woman six-piece jazz and samba-inspired band from Japan. But I'll set aside these digressions and go back to Hooke, and the instance of ink viewed microscopically, with which I began this paper. Close your eyes and bring that highly textured and inky spot to mind.

Period. Full stop.

FOOTNOTES

1. Silver, S. (2016) [Online].
2. Silver, S. (2016) [Online].
3. Grafton, A. (2020), p. 256.
4. Sykes, J.B. (ed.) (1976), p. 556.

REFERENCES

Grafton, A. (2020) *Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe*. Boston: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.

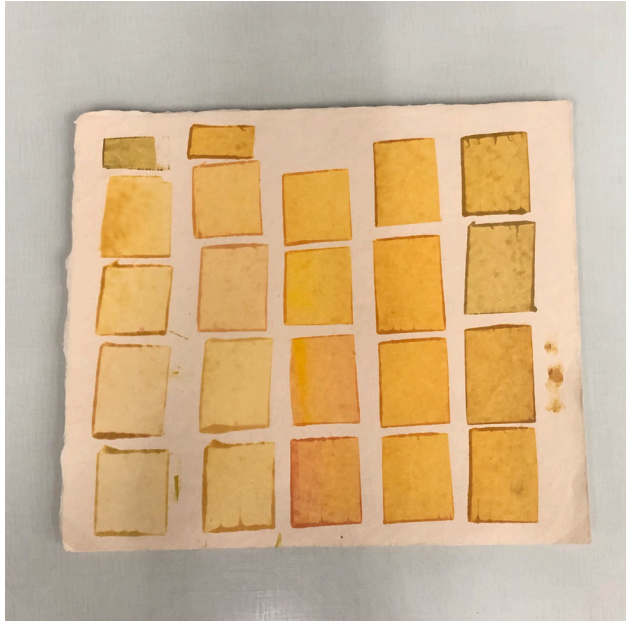
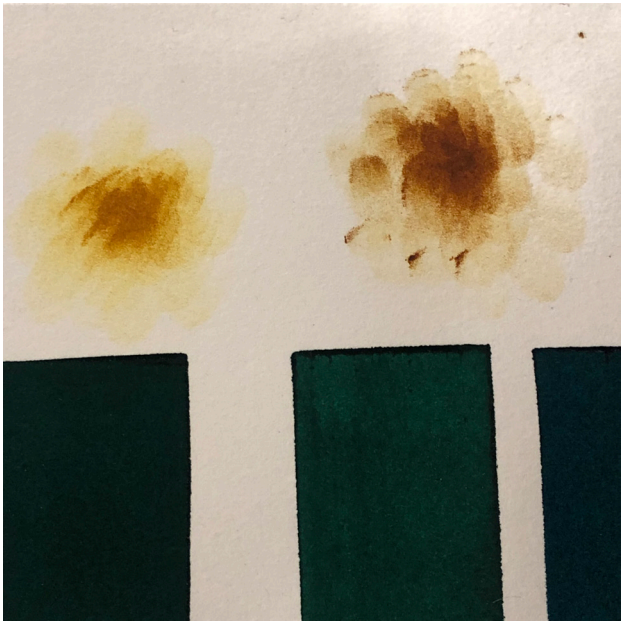
Silver, S. (2016) 'Full Stop', Section III: Digression, MIAC (The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought) [Online museum]. Available at: <http://www.mindisacollection.org/fullstop> (Accessed: 19 May 2022)

Sykes, J.B. (ed.) (1976) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

IMAGE GALLERY



Images: Barbara Balfour, ink draw-downs



AUTHOR

Barbara Balfour

Copyright © 2023 Barbara Balfour

Presented at IMPACT 12 Conference, Bristol, The Printmakers' Voice,

21-25 September 2022 UK September 2022

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.