

FLEXOGRAPHIC ARTISTS' BOOKS

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Abstract

This article introduces experimental artists' books created in the interstices between technology and tradition. The series of books are created by utilizing scraps produced via flexographic label printing. Each book is constituted by means of the accumulation of paper on the machine, which introduces a never-ending page structure as a result of the continuous roll, creating a swirling formation. The work is an inquiry on growth, imperfection, form and time, enriched by the impact of mechanical processes that are inherent to the creation of the book. It also investigates experimental uses of printing and paper-cutting mechanisms.

Keywords: Flexographic Label Printing, Artists' Books, growth, imperfection, form

Artists' Books and Rotary Label Printing

The process of flexography is the starting point of the artist's books (Fig. 1) presented in this paper. The anatomy of the books is made up of scraps that result from a flexographic printing process involving industrial rotary label printing machines. As these machines produce individual stickers, they create a roll of excess materials, i.e. the frames of the stickers, which are usually trashed at the end of the label printing process. I manipulate these scrap rolls with bees wax, glass particles, acrylic paint and medium to make a uniform surface as well as a fleshy texture that emphasizes the curves of the piece. The resultant form invokes a sea creature, a tree stump, a life form.

The circular book series proposes inquiries on form and a narrative utilizing flexo printing synthesized with the book-making process. I discuss the imperfect presence of these books in connection to wabi sabi and lightness, drawing links to cyclic forms and time. The resulting work is a tribute to paper cutting, printmaking and bookmaking traditions—a combination of mechanical and handmade processes.

Flexography and Paper Cutting

Flexography, which utilizes continuous rolls, is a form of rotary printing that became popular in the late 20th century for packaging, label-making and newspaper printing [1]. The spiral formation of the flexographic labelling machine remnants curiously promote a rhythmic aesthetic form through debris, hinting at a link between mechanical processes and those of nature. At the end of the process, the machine-generated paper

Fig. 1. *Infinite* by Ilgım Veryeri Alaca, mixed media, 12.5 × 17.7 × 17.7 inches, 2012. (© Ilgım Veryeri Alaca)



cutting and printing creates two rolls. The original substrate roll in this case turns into a printed label roll and a scrap roll (Fig. 2). Separating a single roll into male and female complementaries is similar to the traditional Ottoman paper-cutting art called *kati'* [2]. In *kati'*, the female and male parts are displayed side by side, whereas in this work, the negative and positive parts of the original roll are separated. The scrap roll is turned into an artwork; the commercial product—the printed label roll—is discounted. There is a resonating, wabi-sabi-like incompleteness and imperfection in this act [3]. The hierarchy between two twin forms is interchanged, turning waste into the object of a plea.

Imperfect Presence

I was inspired by John Cage in this series, in relation to his idea regarding the importance of indeterminacy and absence in forming a work. The work in question in this case is the book [4]. In the absence of writing, the book also is a reminder of nonnarrative and marks an attempt to “reinvent the structures of narration” [5]. The unpredictable adaptation of flexographic label printing leftovers into an artist's book creates a metaphor referencing erratic growth. It also constitutes an effort to effect creation out of surplus. As Cook states, “The logarithmic spiral is an expression of growth,” as he draws our attention to the organic aspects of that growth. He also debates about perfect growth in comparison to erratic growth, questioning the perception of the laws of nature and art in his work, in which he studies spirals of varying types, from shells to spiral nebulae [6].

The organic look of the book also recalls a flimsy, machine-made structure that has been further manipulated by the hand, suggesting a coexistence of imperfection with aptness. In this sense, it is like the installation of Kemal Önsoy, *The Rose Cannot Blossom in the Plasm*. The spiral in Önsoy's work starts from the ground and reaches the ceiling with its DNA-shaped structure as thin branches support its elevation.

Lightness and Mass

The eliminated labels create windows on the surface of the piece that enable a potential penetration to the depths of the roll visually but not physically, creating a texture by the superimposition of layers. The form is a simile for experiencing the past and the present in a holistic moment.

The spine of the book is soft. Its shape changes very slowly, at a pace not visible to the eye, because very thinly cut strips nimbly hold up the book's form. The bulky appearance is deceptive; the book is unexpectedly weightless because of the removed labels. This aspect of the piece makes reference to Italo Calvino's praise of lightness. Lightness is studied in his work as an important component of literature, as he describes the poet who can “raise himself above the weight of the world” [7]. In this regard, the void that can be observed on the surface of the book not only enables an inviting possibility of access into the depths and layers of the book, but also introduces an ephemeral lightness in the structure of the book. Nonetheless, the thin wrapping of these columnlike strips creates a mass that is not possible to enter. This can be accounted for as a reference to the present moment and its links to memory and the past. Since the stickiness of the label is created by means of paste, the slow motion of this rolling created surfaces that automatically came to be glued onto each other. It is not possible to turn a page, nor is it possible to experience the book aside from its final surface unless by way of imagination or by its destruction, echoing the removal and occasional

pastings in the altered book *Silence* created by Buzz Spector [8]. In Spector's work, the text is visible, yet not readable, because of torn pages. In my work, on the other hand, the text is nonexistent. There is a distance introduced by both book objects. Spector suggests that the altered book is allegorical as its body may be identified as a "ruin" or as "readymade" [9]. In this case, the residue presents itself as a relic of presence.

Curves and Time

The continuity of a single page (a curve) throughout the book creates an uninterrupted surface while making reference to indivisible time. The circular movement mimics the long single sentence structure of the cyclic poem "Sunstone" by Octavio Paz. I find a parallel between the two works both in form and content, particularly when considering the following lines: "turning course of a river that goes curving, advances and retreats, goes roundabout, arriving forever... a single presence in the procession of waves, wave over wave until all is overlapped" [10]. Cyclical patterns can be regarded as a leitmotif for Paz, as they can in this series as well. Hirsch states that, in *Alternating Current*, Paz mentions the succession of instants that dissolve into each other, forming a rhythm [11]. Similarly, the process of rolling adds a musicality to this sculptural form. The final work implies movement and hum, much like that which may be found in the performance of the whirling dervish.

Curves, as conceptualized by Thompson, are "time-diagrams" [12]. The sequencing of the individual rectangular pages in a stereotypical book is substituted, here, by the uninterrupted swirling of a single sheet of paper doubling and tripling back onto itself. The long horizontal paper roll, like a film roll, hints at the continuous time of the self, a life time, a cocoon. In this way, the curvilinear form of the artist's book elevates the book from its common sphere and carries it to a planetary state, the rolling pages hinting at movement in time and space.

Altering Mechanical Production and Print Process

The flexographic artist's book idea stems from the kinship of art and technology and how they may open up new paths for each other. The frontiers of printmaking (e.g. etching, lithography, screen printing) as well as bookmaking have undergone a major transformation with the domination of new technology.

Brand new ways of printing, such as "ultraviolet lithography" used in industry and scientific research, expand the understanding of artistic printmaking. Though it may appear unrelated, the origin of Ultraviolet (UV) Lithography is an artistic hand-printed lithography technique invented by Alois Senefelder in 1798. The relations between artistic lithography and UV lithography reveal the interdependencies of art, technology and innovation. This relation is proof of continuous advances in printmaking that may be documented chronologically alongside changing technology. While it is significant to study new plate options and printing surfaces, it may be noteworthy to study the full mechanical production for the purposes of in-depth analysis.

Research shows that contemporary artists find ways to utilize various components of the print process to form artwork in unusual ways, as in the music video created via woodcut

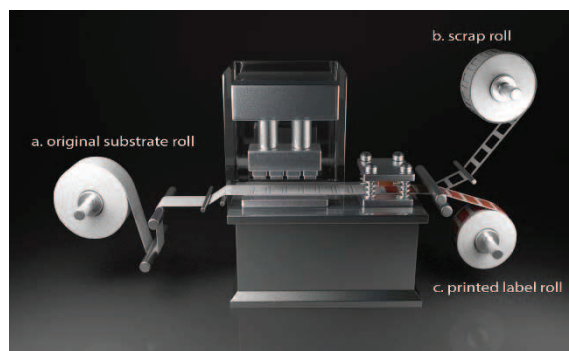


Fig. 2. 3D model of the flexographic label printing process. (© Ilgar Veryeri)

surfaces by Tromarama. Artistic experimentation with technology enabled diverse processes to be interpreted with intuition and human perception, as in the installations that capture electron micrographs by Patricia Olynyk. In Olynyk's *Sensing Terrains*, the installation, with digital prints on Chinese silk and sound, introduces a hybrid production process [13].

In the current work, I investigate the potential of flexography residues in the formation of new artists' books that focus on the poetics of cyclic form, time and imperfection. Print or prototype manufacturing processes may have further possibilities for artists. The process is unorthodox and bears the potential for creative thinking. The artist's book presented is an endeavor to link two distant disciplines while searching for answers to questions such as: Since printmaking is directly influenced by technology, how can artists utilize new technology? In return, how can artists' input be inspirational in terms of making new technological discoveries, as in the case UV lithography?

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