CONTENTS

Contributors 4

Editorial 6

Two Gun Tony and the Prints of War
Paul Gough 7

Spatial Arrangement and Information Transfer in
Sandow Birk's *Depravities of War*
Hannah Acton 15

Vicarious Expression; Collage and Disaster
Erik Waterkotte 22

Spectacle in a State of Exception
Allen Ball 26

Not a Chance in Hell
Gerri York 30

About Malaspina Printmakers 37
Richard Hamilton *Kent State*, 67.2 x 87.2 cm, screenprint on paper, 1970

Few contemporary artists can have pushed the boundaries of how prints and multiples are made than Richard Hamilton. One of the founders of the Independent Group, which met in London between 1952-55, and chief progenitor of the British Pop Art movement, Hamilton made his first etchings and drypoints while a student in London in the late 1930s. He experimented with lithography over the next decade, but it was his innovative use of screenprinting, and his inventive use of photographic and hand-drawn stencils, which brought him international acclaim throughout the 1960s. Photography, collage and montage also became integral components in his practice and extended the language and possibilities of the print medium in ways that few had ever dared. But Hamilton has never been much interested in formal innovation for its own sake: he has been inexorably drawn towards highly politicised subject-matter, producing uncomfortable and provocative artworks, often in narrative sequences or in multiple groupings. Perhaps his most notorious work may be the series of prints of the shooting of student protestors by Ohio National Guardsmen at Kent State University in May 1970. The prints were made from photographs of a television screen broadcasting the demonstrations on the BBC evening news. Hamilton had set up his camera...
in front of the television for a week and chanced upon the dreadful sight of dead and dying protestors: 'It was too terrible an incident in American history to submit to arty treatment' he said afterwards, 'Yet there it was in my hand, by chance. It seemed right, too, that art could help to keep the shame in our minds.'

These prints set the tone for Hamilton's art in the coming decades – as he produced work that was invariably provocative, awkward, and visually arresting. For someone who thrived on technical challenges, Hamilton found paint on canvas simply too limiting and was thus drawn towards novel graphic and print techniques. In the 1980s he experimented with the Quantel paintbox, a dedicated computer graphics workstation, to create original artworks for the BBC series 'Painting with light', but it was his ceaseless investigation of printmaking processes, often in unusual and complex combinations with other media, that produced some of the most memorable icons of the Thatcher period in Great Britain. Using mass media archetypes as a mirror of the times, political violence is never far from the surface of his work, whether it be the 'dirty' protests in Northern Ireland or the abstracted image of an infra-red video still of an armoured car driving through streets of bomb wreckage.

Critic and historian Hal Foster, places Hamilton amongst a select band of distinguished artists who have created some of the memorable political icons of the late 20th century, including Warhol's race riot screen prints and Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof canvases, arguing that 'the powerful iconicity of Hamilton's "Protest Pictures" places them all together'. At 86 years of age, Hamilton has lost little of this edge. His most recent political print is a giant digital collage, 2 meters by 1, of the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, which was stitched together and printed at the Centre for Fine Print Research in Bristol. As Peter Spens reports in Studio International, the print is disturbing in its intensity:

*Blair emerges as a Roy Rogers/Reaganesque figure (minus horse), set against a background of battle-torn, smoke-ridden desert, with child-like pudgy hands grasping uncertainly, a symmetrically holstered pair of six-shooters. It is not a picture of success, nor even of confidence. The expression is apprehensive of things to come.*

Richard Hamilton *The Subject*, 206.7 x 209.9 cm, oil on canvas support 1988-90, Tate Britain, London
Borrowing from the popular culture of the Cowboy Western, Hamilton captures the Blair figure in a disconcerting level of detail; there are no dark corners in which to hide uncomfortable truths, every detail of the figure is displayed with unnerving exactitude, only the staged, out-of-focus background suggests that the spatial—and possibly ethical—context for the politician’s readiness is somewhat unclear. Hamilton is a fastidious technician and he demanded an extraordinarily high level of technical specification to achieve this image, utilizing the most advanced digital print processes available in the research centre and drawing on the expertise of half a dozen senior research staff and professors. So as to lend the image the cultural authority of a seasoned history painting, Hamilton worked with the research centre to create a bespoke substrate that would lend an authority and robustness to the print; the result was the Hewlett Packard Premium canvas, a sufficiently sensitive surface that took months of trial and error to achieve.

Using 21st Century print processes to mimic, or pay homage to past masters is also at the heart of the work of Sandow Birk, which is being hosted this autumn at the Simon Fraser University Gallery in Vancouver. Like Hamilton’s strident image of a beguined Blair, Birk works on an epic, almost cinematic scale: his monumental woodblocks of invasion, incarceration, and investigation are finely hewn into large sheets of plywood, each one 4 feet by 8. His Deprivities of War suite (2007) is a series of 15 large woodblock prints inspired by (and paying frequent reference to) the etchings of Jacques Callot, whose seventeenth century Miseries of War, were the inspiration for Goya’s Disasters of War prints.
some two hundred years later. But in place of the tiny, highly wrought nuances of their etchings, Birk has created panoramic renditions of post-modern warfare: watch-towers and humiliated prisoners, CCTV and ugly oil fires, military violation and messy violence, all illustrated in bold graphic form on a terrifying, almost cinematic, scale.  

Why is it that printmaking has proved so popular amongst artists who wish to make public denunciations of war and violence? Prints can be reproduced and circulated as seditious literature, incorporated in pamphlets and printed relatively easily. Indeed, the first official war artist to be commissioned by the British government in the First World War was an experienced etcher, Muirhead Bone, whose work was considered to be both factual and illustrative, but even more significantly, it reproduced well on the poorer quality newsprint that was available during the war. However, Bone could not have been more diametrically opposed to the likes of Hamilton in his views on warfare. He had a solid, if unspectacular, reputation as an etcher. His first folio of prints—published in 1904—demonstrated a facility for capturing the complex architecture of cityscapes and earned him the enviable moniker of the ‘London Piranesi’. Like the Italian master he was adept at rendering massive architectural spaces, often under construction or demolition. Where some artists might have demurred at the challenge of drawing ocean liners in a dry-dock or tens of thousands of shells in a munitions factory, Bone delighted in them. Many critics were less than thrilled; one reviewer denounced their gratuitous exactitude, describing his Western Front lithographs as being ‘too true to be good’. Another said they were, ‘like a peep at the war through the wrong end of the telescope’.  

Otto Dix  Verwundeter—Herbst (Wounded Soldier) 1916, Bapaume, etching, aquatint, drypoint, 1924.

chop 10
the Western Front; in the hands of Otto Dix or George Grosz, and more rarely in the sardonic images of an Englishman like Percy Smith, print techniques such as foul bite or deeply incised drypoint, were used to fix the random violence and anonymous slaughter of the trenches. The convulsed and clutching infantryman in Otto Dix’s Wounded Soldier would simply not have worked in any other medium; the scabrous surface of his filthy uniform exactly matched by the pock-marked and scored surface of the etching plate.

Seventy-five years later the British painter John Walker was drawn back into his family’s past to create a portfolio of 27 etchings, Passing Bells. He had been moved and stimulated by conversations with his father who had served on the Somme in 1916, a 5-month long battle in which eleven of Walker’s family died. In his bare and denuded prints Walker captures something of the desolate banality of that first modern war: in a grotesque turn of pictorial phrase the soldier is depicted with a sheep’s bare skull, part victim, part gas-mask, a plaintive semi-human figure isolated in a wasted landscape.

As in Dix’s prints, the visual components are stripped to the barest essentials, the tonal scheme coagulating into a denuded composition of figure and horizon, of corpse and tree stump. One critic wrote of the plates as being ‘wounded’ by the creative process; this is especially true of the Passing Bells suite. It is, writes Jack Flam: evident in the rawness of the drawn lines, which at times are like exposed nerves, and in the way the corrosive action of the acid on the plate is made to eat away at our sensibilities just as they did the metal.  

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To the British imagination the transmitted memories of the First World War still exercise a dread fascination, and there is a sustained almost irrepressible interest in Great War poetry, painting and printmaking. Two of the most well-known artists of that period were Paul Nash and Richard Nevinson, who could not have been more different in temperament, character and artistic aspirations; while Nevinson was pugilistic, contrary and jagged, Nash was a rather effete, even vapid artist—with a very limited repertoire—when he found himself, rather begrudgingly, thrust into the trenches of the First World War in France. But the war made Nash and ruined Nevinson. Their lives only overlapped once or twice during the conflict, but each time it was Nevinson’s tough, uncompromising printmaking that attracted Nash. From the front-line in Spring 1917, he asked his wife to buy a copy of Nevinson’s 1916 drypoint, Ypres after the First Bombardment, as it was now ‘a part of the world I’m interested in’.7

Later that year, Nevinson helped Nash learn lithography and purchased one of his drawings. Like Wilfred Owen’s poetry, Nash’s art was transformed by the hard realities of the trenches but it was Nevinson’s angular pictorial language and accessible modernism that made it possible for him to make the transformation from a watercolourist of rather limpid landscapes into an artist of substance. Printmaking acted as the bond and the bridge. We can see the formal development in Nash’s work as the war progressed; how he borrowed Nevinson’s use of sharp, stabbing lines driving diagonally across the picture surface, as a representation of driving rain and lethal gunfire, and how he learned to exploit the deep bite of an engraving tool to lend a harsh angularity to his images of the bruised and violated landscape.
When the war was over, Nash realized he had changed forever. At the age of 30 he returned to the ‘Old World’ crammed with the vivid impressions of war, his innocence and idealism strained, if not shattered, in the trenches of the Western Front. Ahead, he wrote ominously, lay the ‘struggles of a war artist without a war’. Thereafter, the strained rhetoric of peace interested him, just as it fascinates a continuing band of artists who have played with the delicate balance between peace and war, between calm and violence. Czech-born artist Mila Judge-Fursova has a recurring interest in the juxtaposition of feminine beauty and dangerous weapons. Pistols made of both base metal and embroidered crochet recur in her finely wrought prints, as MacLennan has written, ‘they have echoes of Goya’s subversive irony about them as well as the unflinching pain of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits of her damaged body, strapped and riveted, rigidly straight backed in corset-prisons.’ The vexed imbalance between peace and conflict has been explored by a number of European artists keen to make prints in three-dimensions. British printmakers such as Paul Coldwell and Alison Branagan have created medals that join printmaking techniques with the language of protest and peace. Branagan has produced engraved pseudo-military medals and ribbons as parodies of the recruiting ruses of standing armies. Coldwell worked on an etched medal in 2000 where he wanted the two sides to suggest conflict between good and bad, life and death, deriving his ideas from grim radio reports from war-torn Bosnia.

More recently, Richard Hamilton has also embraced the format creating a medal for dishonour, just as David Smith had done in the 1970s. On one side, his ‘bête noir’, a grinning Tony Blair, on the other his rather leering ‘spin-master’ Alistair Campbell. Angry and rhetorical, Hamilton’s work does not advocate peace or reconciliation, unlike the etched enamels of Elizabeth Turrell, another Bristol-based artist whose work as an enamellists, researcher and

curator has consistently promoted the principles of peace. Recently she created a series of badges to commemorate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "I find the form of the cross very potent," states Elizabeth, "for me it is a universal symbol from ancient times, still powerful today, both as a symbol and sign. Each of these enamel crosses are markers of incident and conflict and fragments of text from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are used to remind the viewer and wearer that these are words we should all heed." And the resulting work is strident and dignified, powerful without being polemic, taking the powers of printmaking in new formal and dialectic directions.

Elizabeth Turrell Red Cross, 5.715 x 5.715 cm, vitreous enamel on etched copper 2007.

1 Richard Hamilton, Kent State 1970. The work was printed by Dietz Offizin, Bavaria and published by Dorothea Leenhart, Munich in an edition of 5000.
4 Sian North Birk: The Depravities of War, Simon Fraser University Gallery, Vancouver, September 12 - October 24, 2009.
5 Manchester Guardian, 30th August 1917.
7 Paul Gough, A Terrible Beauty: War, Art and the Imagination (Bristol, 2009)
10 The medal was developed and cast at the centre for Fine Print Research, by Dr Peter Walters and Professor Stephen Hoskins using 3D Modelling software to generate a 3D displacement model from the 2D artworks provided by the artist. See http://amnuwe.ac.uk/cfr/index.asp?pageid=696.
11 Professor Elizabeth Turrell, in conversation with the author; summer 2009.