

Photocopy Art - Who Were the Pioneers?

Author: David Liss - ARTFOCUS 56/ Vol 4 #2/Winter 1995/1996 (Article reprinted online in Women Artists of Canada)



Lieve Prins (Amsterdam)

Tree of Fruitfulness



Sarah Jackson (Halifax)

Bride's Thoughts

The exhibition titled, *What Happened to the Pioneers?* held at Galerie Arts Technologiques in Montreal in September, 1995, was a lively exploration of the origins and developments associated with the brief history of Photocopy Art.

The curatorial thesis of this exhibition was to examine the use of the photocopier machine within the development of each artist's work and to establish an historical context for Copy Art as a legitimate 20th Century artistic medium. To this end, the curators installed the early photocopier works of each artist alongside examples of their current artistic practice, for comparative study. Curators Monique Brunet-Weinman and Jacques Charbonneau selected the work of 12 women artists from five countries who had advanced the experimental use of the photocopier machine as an art tool dating back to the late 60's and early 70's. They included Amal Abdenour, Barbara Astman, Dina Mar, Marisa Gonzalez, Sarah Jackson, Doreen Lindsay, Joan Lyons, Lieve Prins, Sonia Landy Sheridan, and Nel Tenhaaf.

What was the historical beginning of photocopier art?

The photocopier machine was first used by artists involved in the International Mail Art Movement of the 60's, as a quick and inexpensive way to produce spontaneous small-scale collages and works of art suitable for mailing. Several Canadian artists from that era played an integral role in the development of work in the photocopier medium including Barbara Astman, Sarah Jackson, Doreen Lindsay and Nel Tenhaaf who had seminal works in the show. The inclusion of the exhibition in the programs of *Mois de la Photo* and the International Symposium of Electronic Art, uniquely situates the photocopier process as a culmination of the modern technologies of printmaking, mechanical reproduction, electronics, photography, and most recently, digital technology.

Before any discussion of this fascinating medium begins, however, it is necessary, though not

entirely possible, to define what is generally understood to be photocopy art, or as it is usually referred to, Copy Art. In the preface to his catalogue of the extensive 1987 survey exhibition, *Medium: Photocopy*, Georg Muhleck attempts to clarify: "We are far from a common understanding or even a representation of Copy Art. The only common denominator which I could find is the use of the copier itself. Often the most genuine photocopies, artistically speaking, are the ones which were not intended to be mass-produced, but to exist as a unique piece. In these cases the copier is deprived of its copying function. Although the concept of "copy" is still connected with its instrument, the copier, we are nevertheless seeing an original, which ranks as a drawing, a painting, a montype, etc."

Perhaps a more succinct and democratic definition can be found in the 1978 publication, *Copyart, the First Complete Guide to the Copy Machine* which simply states that copy art " is anything that has been created, transformed or enhanced through the use of the copy machine." Of course, when the photocopier was invented in the 40's its basic purpose was reproducing documents and facilitating business communications. In 1968 the 3M Company developed the first colour copier and sometime after that, perhaps in an office or university library, the technology was subverted for purposes of experimentation, fun and art by people placing hands, faces and whatever else could fit, onto the glass surface of the machine.

What examples are there of these pioneer artists?

The artists in *Pioneers* have produced an astonishing array of compelling visual results through sometimes complex and usually quite simple technological manipulation. Using Xerox's first colour copier, the Model 6500, introduced to the market in 1973, Doreen Lindsay created a sequential three-stage triptych by photocopying a grouping of three apples placed directly on the glass surface of the machine. On each panel of *Three Apples* (1978) Lindsay was able to significantly alter tonal values by simply pushing a button.

American Sonia Landy Sheridan is one of the most important and internationally recognized figures in the development of Copy Art. In 1968 she was hired by the 3M Company as an artist-in-residence for the purpose of developing their colour-in-colour machine for commercial, graphic and artistic flexibility. She began teaching the first course in the medium she refers to as "generative systems" at the Art Institute of Chicago. Sheridan's work in this exhibition, *Wall Notes* (1968-82) is a large and complex four-panel document of various photocopy techniques, accompanied by detailed notes on the process. It reads like the personal pages of an artist's sketchbook, revealing Sheridan's techno-friendly approach to the creative process and its relationship to art, science and technology. Her extensive repertoire of technical innovations include experiments which involve the control of time and light exposures, resulting in the stretching and compressing of an image.

As interesting and complex as some techniques may be, with engaging visual results, of course, we are reliant upon human imagination and many of the early works in this exhibition were achieved through relatively straightforward procedures. Well-known Canadian artist Nell Tenhaaf's *Fence* (1978) is a large work composed of 32 laminated black and white photocopies, each 8 1/2 X 11 inches. Using a variety of tonal shades and hand markings, Tenhaaf stenciled, then photocopied and juxtaposed bible quotes with song lyrics of punk poet Patti Smith. Regardless of the "humble" means of production, *Fence* is a visually complex and important feminist work, intended to liberate women beyond the parameters of religious and historical oppression.

Fellow Canadian, Barbara Astman, another important "historical" figure in Copy Art, constructed a sequential work titled *Myra* (1977), using the Xerox 6500, in which a woman appears in front of various European architectural monuments. Close examination reveals that the architectural images have been lifted from books and Myra's image has been superimposed, through

photocopy, standing in front of these landmarks, in humorous imitation of tourist snapshots or postcards.

In 1972, Marisa Gonzalez, from Madrid, used the then new technology of the 3M Color-in-Color machine to create *To the End*, a series of four small and whimsical works which set silhouetted figures amidst a landscape of colourful abstract forms. Despite the primitive nature of Gonzalez's imagery, she demonstrates the playful pictorial potential of the copy machine and its legitimacy as an expressive medium for visual communication.

For American Joan Lyons the photocopy process is a logical extension of drawing and printmaking. In three works from her untitled symmetrical drawing series (1978), Lyons produced Haloid Xerox images by a non-camera photographic technique in which various objects, (a plant, a bird's wing), have been placed in contact with a photosensitive surface. The xerographic plate records the images in photographic detail, giving the distinct appearance of photo-lithographic techniques. She recorded, then rotated each item slightly, several times in clockwise motion, producing the final mandala-like image.

Much of the excitement surrounding the discovery of the copy machine as an art tool was its ability to instantly produce and reproduce works of art. In the burgeoning age of fast food, instant coffee and entertainment at the flick of an on/off switch, many artists found the rapid and inexpensive methods of the copier an appealing and necessary way for art to compete with other modern technological developments.

Los Angelino Dina Dar created extravagantly colourful compositions in the 70's by assembling and photocopying objects directly on the glass surface of the Xerox 6500. The bold reds and magentas in *One Bird Left* (1978) have surprisingly (or not) retained their intensity over the years and retention of high-contrast, photographic details are qualities which support photocopied images as legitimate works of art.

So what did happen to the Pioneers?

Only three artists continue to utilize photocopy technology. A large and colourful underwater fantasy, *Tree of Fruitfulness* (1995) by Lieve Prins of Amsterdam and *L'embryon a l'ecoute de la vie* (1955) by France's Amal Abdenour, were created using the modern CLC Canon Laser Copier. Joan Lyons' *Memorial for the Trees* (1992) is a quilt of images transferred onto fabric.

Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, most of these artists have moved on to other mediums, notably photography and computer technology. It was evident that these artists have not abandoned their aggressively experimental attitudes towards new technologies and their innovative approach to image-making.

Nell Tenhaaf is gaining international recognition with photo light-box works which critique the medical industry's monopoly on ethics and technology and its historical and continued manipulation of the female body. Doreen Lindsay's latest work, *Death in the Grasses* (1995) consists of hand-tinted photographs which mimic tonal explorations of her earlier photocopy pieces. Mostly, though, it is the wide open frontiers of computer technology that is being navigated by these techno-pioneers. Barbara Astman's *Seeing and Being Seen* (1994-95) is a sequential work similar in structure to *Myra*, which has been achieved by transferring a computer output onto mylar.

In particular, Sonia Landy Sheridan and Marisa Gonzalez have developed their extensive technological and visual vocabulary through the computer, with the same dynamic approach that characterized their encounters with the photocopy machine. Sheridan's *Four Friends* (1995) and Gonzalez's *Broken Dreams, Broken Silences* (1995) transcend the technology beyond its medium to create visually powerful and conceptually engaging works of art.

But it was left to another exhibition, *Atrium Vera*, running concurrently in a gallery space several blocks away and also curated by Jacques Charbonneau, to examine the state of Copy Art in the

90's. Twenty-one artists from Canada, France, Germany and the United States utilized the photocopy process in numerous innovative ways, often in conjunction with other mediums, to produce everything from two-dimensional wall works to sculpture and room-sized installations. This show provided vibrant evidence of the extent to which the photocopier has continued to be used as a valid artistic tool.

In the light of recent developments, Copy Art may be considered the link between Mail Art and digital technology. It shows that artists, as always, are at the forefront of technical exploration. The abandonment of Copy Art by the women in *Pioneers* reveals more about those particular artists' willingness and ability to work diligently and intelligently with advanced technologies, than it does about the limitations of the photocopier. It also represents the dawning of an age of democracy and accessibility to technology in general, which up until very recently, was denied women, because it was assumed that they were either incapable of or disinterested in these directions.

By David Liss