

## Prix de Print N0. 15

### Edition by Bill Thompson

Juried by Roberta Waddell

This iteration of the Art in Print Prix de Print has been judged by Roberta Waddell. The Prix de Print is a bimonthly competition, open to all subscribers, in which a single work is selected by an outside juror to be the subject of a brief essay. For further information on entering the Prix de Print, please go to our website: <https://artinprint.org/about-art-in-print/>.

#### Bill Thompson, *Edition* (2015)

Etching with chine collé, image 12 1/2 x 14 inches, sheet 21 1/2 x 22 1/4 inches. Edition of 45 with 1 bon à tirer, 5 artist's proofs and 5 printer's proofs. Printed and published by Center Street Studio, Milton Village, MA. \$900.

Bill Thompson's *Edition*, at first glance, is an austere, balanced, minimalist grid, divided into eight columns and seven rows, printed on chine collé and perfectly placed on the sheet. The defining lines were laid out digitally, then photoetched on copper without a hint of the artist's hand. So what is the significance of the numbers, mostly fractions, that are also crisply photoetched and printed within each square? Of course, I quickly realized, each alludes to a sequentially numbered print within the edition of 45, and Thompson didn't forget to include the bon à tirer (BAT)<sup>1</sup> and printer's and artist's proofs, filling out all 56 boxes. A hastily applied mark in red pencil, circling one of the numbers, disrupts the pristine etching. What is that about? Again, the answer is clear: the artist has recorded that particular impression's place within the edition.

Thompson's carefully chosen, often cryptic titles conjure fluctuating associations, often obliquely suggesting physical

objects (as in the woodcut *Walk-up* [1994], where we are prompted to read a zigzag line as a staircase). *Edition* takes the verbal-visual connection a step further, labeling the object as both a work of art and a physical document of the complete print edition.

Initially a painter, Thompson's fascination with the confluence of image and object led him to begin working in three dimensions. He draws on dense polyurethane blocks that he cuts into organic shapes, carves, sands by hand and coats with up to 20 layers of automotive paint. These irregularly shaped wall sculptures are then buffed and polished to a gleaming finish that bears no sign of the artist's hand.

For more than 20 years Thompson has also been making prints defined by elegant abstraction and superb yet understated craftsmanship. Most of his recent prints "reflect the forms that I carve as a sculptor" with luminous color and organic curvilinear shapes. He had just completed a print project with master printer James Stroud at Center Street Studio when, he says, "my mind jumped track and landed upon an idea that completely eliminated the need for an image." *Edition* is the result.

Like his wall sculptures, *Edition* is anonymous in touch; the use of graphite ink gives the etching the look of something machine-made, providing an "objectness," akin to that of his other work. But *Edition* is also a commentary on the concept of the editioned print. At Center Street Studio Thompson has worked with traditional media—etching, aquatint and woodcut—and issued his prints in uniform, numbered editions (save for his monoprints). But that supposed uniformity is not what it seems: as Thompson observes, "every print in an edition is essentially unique

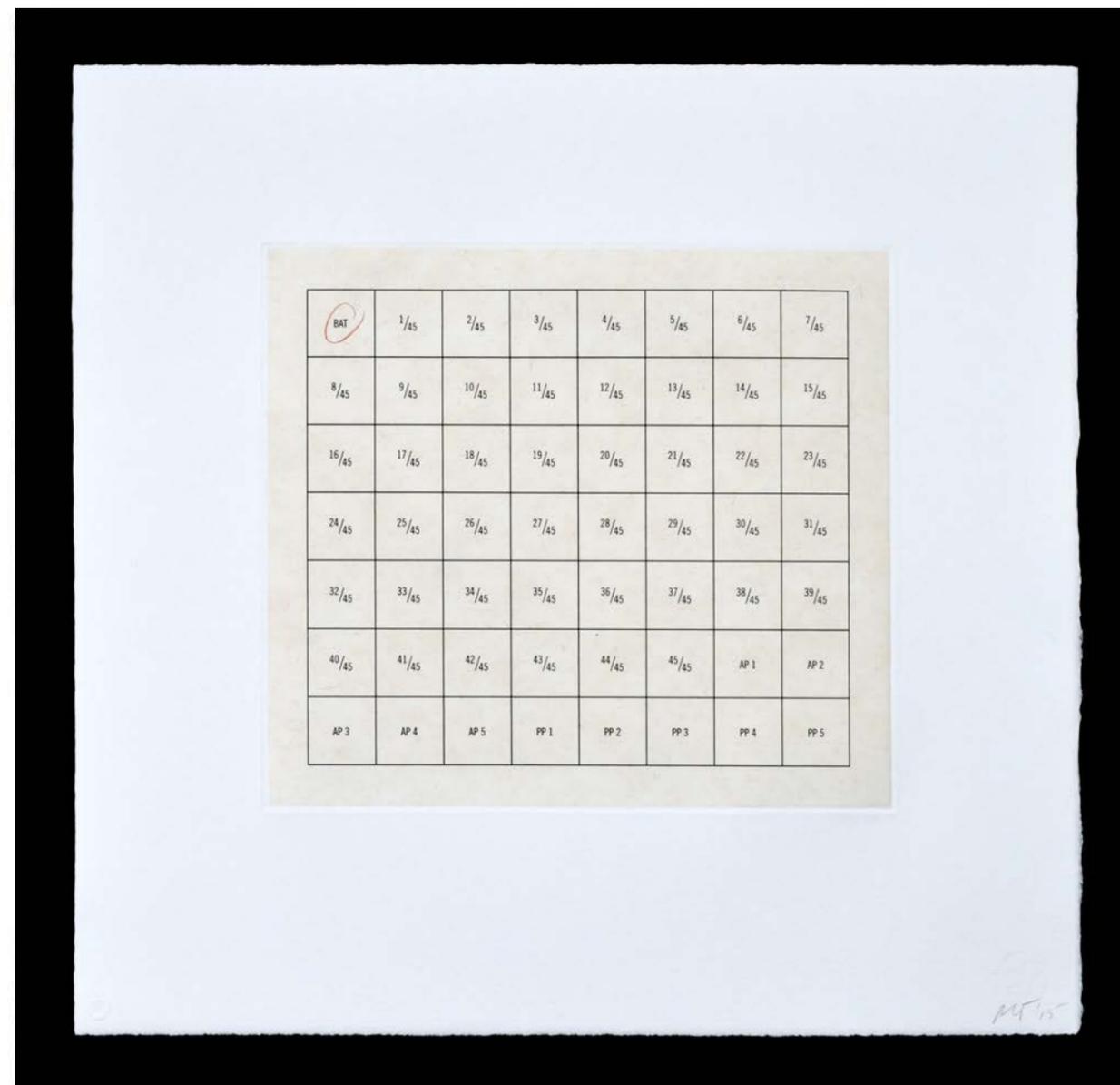
because of both the number change and the slight variation in the artist's signature from print to print." By interjecting his red circle around the edition number of each impression (penciled with a nonfugitive earth pigment), Thompson further bends the rule of printed consistency: "As they progress through the number sequence, the hand-drawn circles vary slightly in shape, with the red adding a chromatic accent to the black and white grid."

These wry observations about printmaking protocols are all the more engaging as Thompson applies them to a clean geometric abstraction printed in a meticulously documented edition. (No matter what the medium, Thompson has stated his "one guiding principle is that I use the least number of elements possible to make a statement.") He insists upon each print's uniqueness even as he adheres strictly to convention at a time when many artists, including those submitting to the Prix de Print, overtly subvert, break or ignore traditional printmaking rules and definitions. In the recent flurry of emails that followed the question "What is a print?" posted on the Association of Print Scholars listserv, Susan Tallman sensibly identified one of the main problems "with trying to come up with hard and fast taxonomies for works of art: As soon as you do so, some artist will come along and make you look a fool." Bill Thompson's witty response to these never quite satisfactory conventions intrigued me and made me smile. ■

*Roberta Waddell is the former Curator of Prints at The New York Public Library.*

#### Notes:

1. The BAT (bon à tirer) is the impression approved for the printer to follow.



Bill Thompson, *Edition* (2015).