

Publishers' Roundtable

Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book at Yale University, March 13 and 14, 2008

Publishers' Roundtable: Getting Started

To begin the preliminary on line component of *The Publishers' Roundtable*, publishers were invited to engage in an e-mail conversation, considering the following list of questions as well as any addition issues and concerns raised by members of the group.

This preliminary dialogue is not intended to exhaust any topic or preempt the conference Roundtable in any way. Instead, it will provide an opportunity to shape to the conference conversation by allowing Roundtable Publishers as well as conference attendees to begin posing questions, voicing opinions, and mapping some of the primary subjects of concern in advance of the conference. The conversation will continue in person at the *Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book* conference on March 13 and 14, 2008.

Excerpts from the electronic dialog will be posted periodically in the weeks leading up the conference.

Publishers' Roundtable: Some Preliminary Questions

*How does your choice of publishing model (livre d'artiste / luxury edition model, handcraft / fine press model, low-cost / higher distribution model, etc.) shape the meaning of the book works your press produces? How does the printing or binding method affect the reader's understanding of (as well as experience of) a text? What is the relationship of the process and the product?

*How do you balance artwork and text in your books? What is the importance of this balance? What are the different effects of the variety of relationships that might exist between art and poetry in the book format (consider the difference between poetry-art books in which images are used to "illustrate" a text, those in which a text is used to accent artwork, those that aim to more fully integrate the two art forms, etc.)?

*How do you select artwork and poetry that will be published together in one volume? What are your primary criteria for each art form? Which comes first in your selection or publication planning process—image or text?

*What is your sense of your press's readership? Who is your intended reader? How do your readers figure in your understanding of the total "meaning" of any individual book you've published? What role does your sense of your readers play in your publishing decisions (selecting texts, images, publishing model, etc)?

*What are the book's strengths and limitations as a format for uniting poetry and art? How does your press manage the limitations and maximize the strengths?

*Does poetry provide particular opportunities /challenges for interaction with artwork that might not be available if you were working with prose? How do you approach poetic projects differently? Does the poetic line function differently in the context of an image-rich book than the prose line or sentence?

*What is the primary motivation for your poetry-art presswork? In other words, why do you publish poetry and art books?

*What, if any, role does collaboration play in your press's mission, work, publications, etc.?

*What makes a successful union of poetry and art in a book?

Publishers Respond: Choosing a Publishing Model

February 17, 2008

How does your choice of publishing model (livre d'artiste / luxury edition model, handcraft / fine press model, low-cost / higher distribution model, etc.) shape the meaning of the book works your press produces? How does the printing or binding method affect the reader's understanding of (as well as experience of) a text? What is the relationship of the process and the product?

Simon Cutts, [Coracle Press](#)

It's less a question of model, than of idiom. Even the illustrated poetry book is an idiomatic object, owing much to the nineteenth century and one which is occasionally useful. But there should be no separable parts of text and image, but just an attempt to find a synthesis that precludes and overrides their separateness. It's a question of finding the simplest approach within an understanding of the gestalt.

Carlolee Campbell, [Ninja Press](#)

I'd like to say, at the outset, that I work essentially alone. I design the books, set them in type by hand, print letterpress on a Vandercook Universal I on dampened handmade paper (in the main), and then bind the entire edition with some assistance in the bindery. Edition sizes hover around 100. This background should put my responses to the questions on a better footing. I

don't choose a publishing model. The publishing model is arrived at through the digestion of the text. It all starts with the text. The design is text-driven—when there is text. The effect that the printing and binding has on the readers understanding of a text cant be known. There isnt a common understanding, especially in poetry. The books I make present and represent *my* understanding, *my* experience of the text. What the reader brings to the book? One can only guess. The relationship of process and product is only everything.

C. Mikal Oness, [Sutton Hoo Press](#)

I make fine press books because I'm interested in publishing verbal text in concert with visual text. Most of my decisions about design are based on what I might think is interesting at the time about *how* meaning is made, not so much about *what* meaning is made. The latter always leads to contrivance. I suppose I can also say that one thing that is always on my mind when I'm making decisions like this is that my mode of production—the very labor and time intensive act of printing by hand—is something I like to push on, to taunt, as if to say, “Yes, this is a persnickety detail that many readers may not notice, and to do that for 200 copies is a little over the top, but I'm going to do it anyway to be sure the experience of this book is complete according to my vision for it.” The process, then, is the product.

“According to the Demands of the Text”

February 20, 2008

Responses from C. Mikal Oness of [Sutton Hoo Press](#)

Q: How do you balance artwork and text in your books? What is the importance of this balance? What are the different effects of the variety of relationships that might exist between art and poetry in the book format (consider the difference between poetry-art books in which images are used to “illustrate” a text, those in which a text is used to accent artwork, those that aim to more fully integrate the two art forms, etc.)?

CMO: I'm interested in what people have come to call artist's books, and know that they have become sexy in the field and among collectors. I like visual art, and I like structures, and feel they are of equal importance to the verbal text in the making of meaning in a book. Sometimes I have incorporated as many pages of visual text as verbal text in a book. Of course, even if I feel that the variety and subtlety of the codex format and binding structure is also a part of the meaning-making machine that is the book, such projects are never looked upon as artists books. In the end, I think that may be a good thing for me, as I feel many artists books diminish the importance of text too much, and their intentions are too transparent, and they feel contrived to me. I don't think I'll ever be a part of that club, though I had, in my earlier days really wanted to be considered. Now I draw from the energy of my collaborators; I take what they give me and read and make the project according to the demands of the texts and my desire to push the technology to whatever limit seems appropriate for the project at hand.

Q: How do you select artwork and poetry that will be published together in one volume? What are your primary criteria for each art form? Which comes first in your selection or publication planning process—image or text?

CMO: When I'm dreaming about what author or what text to use for a book, I often have in mind an artist as well, and an idea about what I think that artist could do for the project. It doesn't ever work out the way I originally intend, which of course is also part of my intension. I have never given a writer a visual text and asked for a verbal text to go along with it. I have never been able to write like that myself, and have never liked ekphrastic writing I've read. Again, it seems contrived. I have given artists manuscripts, however, and asked for their visual contribution, but I have always been clear with them, and talked extensively with them, about NOT ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT. Read it, sure, but work on a visual text that has its own integrity separate from the manuscript. There may be a perverse prejudice in me or a writerly arrogance that feels that it is okay for an artist to work off of a verbal text, but not for a writer to work off a visual text, but for some reason I am more comfortable discussing the caveats involved with a visual artist than I would be working it out with a poet writing about pictures. Let's remember that the binding structure is a text in itself that joins the chorus early on in the reader's experience of the book. I have been blessed with very talented, skilled, and patient collaborators in this regard. There are always hours of discussion about the binding structure.

“Are Images More Visceral than Words?”

February 24, 2008

Remarks from Kyle Schlesinger, [Cuneiform Press](#)

I'm interested in C. Mikal Oness's (Sutton Hoo Press) remarks about selecting texts and images for his books: . . . but for some reason I am more comfortable discussing the caveats involved with a visual artist than I would be working it out with a poet writing about pictures. I wonder why? Ekphrastic writing, at least in the most narrowly defined sense, isn't exactly my thing either, but there are many poems and poets that have written in response to paintings, photographs and films that are of great importance to me as well as many poets whose reputations as visual artists surpassed their would-have-been lives as poets (Vito Acconci and Jim Dine come to mind). And I suspect that many of the people reading this have written some form of inspired response to visual art at some point in time. I'm not directing my question at CMO in particular, but am interested in elaborating on CMO's statement.

I spend almost as much time in the world of experimental cinema as I do in the world of poetry, so artists' books are often a place where these two worlds, the worlds of words and images, tend to mingle. I woke up the other morning with a funny question: has a poem ever made me scream? Laugh? Yes. Cry? Yes. Celan makes me cry, and yes, oddly enough, Wittgenstein does too at times. Scream? I don't think so, at least not in the way that even the most tawdry horror film does. Are images more visceral than words? More kinetic? More emotional? Why is it that even when you know you know what's going to happen and it happens you jump anyway? This

has something to do with suspense and narrative and more. Expectation is the key. As a poet, critic and collaborator, John Ashbery, for example, has spent a lifetime writing about and after visual artists. You never know what's going to happen in his poems but you do know what will happen in Hitchcock and they're both classic.

Images more powerful than words? With the words and images traditionally divided (verso-recto) image wins. See (or at least look) first and read later. And even in the books Alice didn't like (what use is a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?) when there are no images the image of negative space, text blocks and word forms register before linguistic meaning takes place. Or perhaps that is the part of linguistics that intersects with typography that no one can explain? CMO says (caps his) that there will be NO ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT by the visual artist in Sutton Hoo Press books. What's wrong with that? I take it that illustration suggests something to do with the literal interpretation of words? There are many artists (George Schneeman and Trevor Winkfield come to mind) whose literal or double-literal interpretations of the poets' works work wonders and are decidedly not decorations. So I want to know if an illustration inherently detracts from words while an image informed by, but not necessarily a literal rendering of words, necessarily accentuates the poem? The question itself is problematic, for these terms seem a little archaic for artists book discourse, but that's changing.

[“The Overallness of the Book”](#)

February 27, 2008

Some remarks from Simon Cutts of [Coracle Press](#)

Q: How do you balance artwork and text in your books? What is the importance of this balance? What are the different effects of the variety of relationships that might exist between art and poetry in the book format (consider the difference between poetry-art books in which images are used to “illustrate” a text, those in which a text is used to accent artwork, those that aim to more fully integrate the two art forms, etc.)?

SC: There is no linear approach to these things, just a conceptual whole that you work towards from the details of materials, paper, print process etc., and the idea for the book. I feel in the wake of modernism, after concrete poetry, after fluxus, after conceptual works, there is no possibility in the linear approach your questions work from.

It seems almost as if the Cendrars/Delauney ([La Prose du Transsibérien et de La Petite Jehanne de France](#)) motif you have used for this occasion is too nineteenth century for its purpose, too much an archetypal illustrated text, when we are in need of something much more conceptually whole. It's a question of finding the simplest approach within an understanding of the gestalt.

Q: How do you select artwork and poetry that will be published together in one volume? What are your primary criteria for each art form? Which comes first in your selection or publication planning process, -image or text?

SC: Ditto the above : they are never separate

Q: What is your sense of your press's readership? Who is your intended reader? How do your readers figure in your understanding of the total "meaning" of any individual book you've published? What role does your sense of your readers play in your publishing decisions (selecting texts, images, publishing model, etc)?

SC: In a post-Mallarméan world, the reader is built in to this overallness of the book, but more quizzically, there would be Lowenfel's "One reader A Miracle. Two, a mass-movement." Or Pound's "I join these words for four people...O world I feel sorry for you. You do not know these four people." There is a whole practical discussion to be had, about survival, persistence, warehousing , distribution, bookshops and libraries, yet denying the idea of marketing which is anathema, but I sense this is not the place for it.

"An Investigative Process"

February 28, 2008

Remarks from Carolee Campbell of [Ninja Press](#)

Q: What is your sense of your press's readership? Who is your intended reader? How do your readers figure in your understanding of the total "meaning" of any individual book you've published? What role does your sense of your readers play in your publishing decisions (selecting texts, images, publishing model, etc)?

CC: Making and publishing books is strictly an investigative process for me, investigating and stretching my own technical, creative, and intellectual boundaries. I neither consider the readership in my selection of projects nor the resulting book forms.

Q: Does poetry provide particular opportunities /challenges for interaction with artwork that might not be available if you were working with prose? How do you approach poetic projects differently? Does the poetic line function differently in the context of an image-rich book than the prose line or sentence?

CC: Poetry is a distillation of word and imagery not found in prose, a boiling down, the alchemical gold lump that remains behind. It holds me in its thrall throughout the process of the design and distillation process, not to mention the long nuts-and-bolts process of setting type, proofing, printing, and binding.

I don't approach poetic projects differently. I always approach them in the same way—investigatively—its a digestive process—through the metaphorical gut. First, I begin to set some type to see what it might look like. Simultaneously, I begin working on models for the structure of the book. I try materials I know well and investigate risky new ones. I investigate

techniques for building the book structure that will reflect my response to the poetry it holds. As my experience of the word deepens, each successive book model will mirror that shift to the limits of my technical skills.

“Something Suggestive in a Single Line of Poetry”

February 29, 2008

Some remarks from Macy Chadwick of [In Cahoots Press](#)

Q: How does your choice of publishing model (livre d’artiste / luxury edition model, handcraft / fine press model, low-cost / higher distribution model, etc.) shape the meaning of the book works your press produces?

MC: I come to artist’s books from the point of view of an artist—handmade books are my mode of expression, just as stone may be the chosen medium for a sculptor. As a printmaker, I found it increasingly important to incorporate text in my work, and this path naturally led me to book arts. I established In Cahoots Press in 1998 and I print and bind books in small editions, yet I consider myself more an artist than a publisher.

Q: How does the printing or binding method affect the readers understanding of (as well as experience of) a text?

MC: I am interested in the physical experience each individual reader has with my books—and how much control I can have over this experience. Can a container affect the reader’s expectations? Do fold-out pages slow the pace at which a text is revealed? How do the physical considerations of paper, texture, structure affect the overall concept of a book?

Q: What is the relationship of the process and the product?

MC: My process involves designing the book pages while at the press. The overall concept is roughly worked out beforehand, and I do carefully plan the first layer of printing, but I prefer to add elements in reaction to each new layer while at the press. In this way I remain fully engaged in the process, and I avoid feeling as if I am just following orders. It is my hope that the sense of discovery I experience while printing a book will be conveyed to the reader.

Q: How do you select artwork and poetry that will be published together in one volume? What are your primary criteria for each art form? Which comes first in your selection or publication planning process—image or text?

MC: Since I primarily print my own images and text, the selection process is more of a creative, or internal one. Sometimes I begin with an overall concept for a book, based on words not yet formed into a poem. And other times I begin with a process, image, or structure that I would like to work with and develop the book from there.

Q: Does poetry provide particular opportunities /challenges for interaction with artwork that might not be available if you were working with prose? How do you approach poetic projects differently? Does the poetic line function differently in the context of an image-rich book than the prose line or sentence?

MC: I primarily work with poetry in my books. There is something suggestive in a single line of poetry, printed within an image-rich page that I find more powerful than a prose line or paragraph. Somehow the poetic line seems to allow for more interaction within an image.

[“Unimpeded Intuition”](#)

February 29, 2008

Comments from Carolee Campbell, [Ninja Press](#)

I want to reiterate the emphasis on the investigative aspect of making books as art. Given that one brings a high level of technical skill to the process, as any musician or dancer would, the thrill of exploration is at the heart of the work. If “poetry is the discovery of a sound which arises out of unimpeded listening” (Nathaniel Tarn) then, taking that sound, giving it a three dimensional tactility using unimpeded intuition, becomes the process. For me, the process is as important as the product. I’ll introduce the product into the marketplace later. That is why I wrestled with some of the original questions put to us.

Response from Macy Chadwick, [In Cahoots Press](#)

I whole heartedly agree with Carolee that the process is where the magic is. Never am I more inspired or engaged as when I am creating a book at the press. Where are these images taking me? What is this concept really about and how can I find the words to communicate this message both to me and to the viewer? It is this process, this struggle sometimes, that truly makes printing artist’s books an act of art making.

[“The Platform of Publishing”](#)

March 2, 2008

Response from Simon Cutts, [Coracle Press](#)

It all sounds a bit like musical chairs to me! Why does the manipulation have to be based so much in craft process of printing done by yourself? There are great printers in the world, and you can order your book from them, once you’ve learned how to talk to them. That’s the technical skill.

I can understand the vows of letterpress fetishism - its very seductive physicality and materiality, makes you feel harmonized with the world and all that, but where does it leave publishing?

I think we might get too quasi-mystical with all this, in danger of the wrong kind of seriousness, of taking ourselves that way, ('[unimpeded intuition](#)'?, or even 'unimpeded listening' for that matter: when did you last have that!), too utopian for discussion, and who are we to say that printing books is an act of art-making? It's a by-product of the publication. If you were trying to introduce books and bookmaking to an art school, instead of the fine-art printmaking course, then you might have to argue for that, but I don't think that's what our discussion is about. That's also the problem with the whole artist's books field in a way, it's more interested in the individual artist's book than the platform of publishing, and thereby I think unfortunately less interested in the text than in some more fruity 'creativity'.

[“The Material and Immaterial Lives of the Book”](#)

March 5, 2008

Response from Kyle Schlesinger, [Cuneiform Press](#)

When I asked Eliza Newman-Saul why she moved away from artists books and towards conceptual performances and lectures she told me that one major factor was that she felt too much pressure to perform the parallel, and at times conflicting duties of an artist and artisan—moreover, an artisan who wears several hats (bookbinder, typographer, designer, papermaker, printer, photopolymer platemaker, etc.). Then there's the business of distribution, promotion, paying bills, etc. Then there's the necessary activity of keeping the art alive in the form of writing, research, building, reading, and participating in critical discussions such as this. Book artists are not all publishers and vice versa and there's nothing wrong with that. Neither, in my opinion, has an obligation to wear all hats all the time nor to value all aspects of the book. Walter Hamady, for example, has come close to making books all on his own, but I feel that part of the art is realizing ones talents and ones limits on all counts and making use of the resources in the neighborhood. Simon, so far as I know, has his hardcover books bound by a local bookbinder and letterpress work performed by a local printer with excellent results. Concepts, aesthetics, innovations, and subversions are consistently produced in-house in dialogue with community. Decisions, such as what to farm out to others and what do at home, with ones own time, are crucial.

Coming to publishing from a literary background, I indulge in sloppy printing. My primary interest is in getting the work I value into the right hands, and to have fun learning in the process. Perfect inking, imposition, etc. have never been very important to me so long as the author is happy with the book. I've learned to learn that after you've made a book, in whatever sense, you cant help but look and glean from every book you encounter. Every consideration becomes an opportunity, every letterform a decision, every margin a point of departure but the most difficult, or at least consistent tension always seems to be between the material and

immaterial lives of the book, the thing and the idea, object and ideal.

[Production, Distribution, Content](#)

March 7, 2008

Response from Simon Cutts, [Coracle Press](#)

Dick Higgins of Something Else Press used to say that he matched the time he spent editing, organising and producing a book to the time he spent in distribution and getting it out into the world : nine months production therefore nine months distribution. Dick learned from the formal plain-ness of trade printers and binders to make some of the finest books we have seen. Of course, this marriage between production and distribution cannot be extricated from its content.

A similar artisanal approach and understanding informs Jargon Books in their heyday. They didn't necessarily have to do much of it themselves, although in the case of Coracle, as Erica keeps reminding me, we have more time than money and so end up doing quite a lot of it at home! Those kind of tradesmen, the printers and binders, provide the idiomatic structures and strictures that we can break out of, again, without necessarily doing it ourselves, except editorially.

I don't think we should go down the cul de sac of 'book artists', nor get bogged-down in the divisibility of parts of the field, editing, production (paying bills?)!, distribution. Unless we each attempt to find a methodology for our activity different from 'book art', it will be doomed to a branch-line of the visual arts (like moving from 'artists books' to 'conceptual performance'?) and also thereby become the province of galleries and specialist dealers, and with the usual perjorative thrust towards expense and rarity, when in fact the qualities we really want are simple form, plain-ness, imperceptible editing, and hopeful availability.

[The Artful Side of Things](#)

March 8, 2008

Response from Macy Chadwick, [In Cahoots Press](#)

In response, some consider artist's books an art form, as I do, others don't. On the artful side of things, here is a quote from sculptor John Chamberlain: "Artfulness has to do with taking a common thing and making an uncommon item...it's the difference between making a product, copying something you happen to like, and going into an idea deeply and using very common material to bring out a knowledge that has not yet been revealed...this is the high tradition of what art is about, or what I feel it is about."

[Why do you Publish Poetry and Art Books?](#)

March 11, 2008

Q: What is the primary motivation for your poetry-art presswork? In other words, why do you publish poetry and art books?

Carolee Campbell, [Ninja Press](#): The primary motivation for my poetry/art presswork is purely investigative. Working simultaneously on all parts of the book is what excites and challenges me. The evocation of the poetry and its emerging physical manifestation is the magic—the magic of turning ones original idea into a compelling, artistic, seamless whole that, in turn, opens up an intimate dialogue between the artist and the viewer/reader—that’s the expedition I’m on.

Macy Chadwick, [In Cahoots Press](#): My main motivation is to produce artist’s books as an art form. For me, books are my canvas.

C. Mikal Oness of [Sutton Hoo Press](#): The easy part of this question is the ‘why do you publish poetry and art books’ part: poetry and art are just better than anything else. Poetry is literally the most important thing in the world. All the world’s problems are answered by it: “men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there . . .” etc. What is more difficult to talk about—and maybe it is because I’m most interested in the problem—is the primary motivation for making books at all in the way I do—letterpress. The one word answer that keeps coming into my mind as I’ve been turning this question over in my head for the last few years is: sustainability. I still don’t know how to fully make sense of this idea, because when I think of all the obvious ways I can interpret this notion, none of them are completely accurate in and of themselves or even taken together: spiritual food, money to pay bills, verve for art and life, control. For me so much is about process, and I like the reader to have a sense of the process of the making of the book when they use it; I like having it revealed in the binding for example, however subtly. But how does process jive with the notion of sustainability? I keep hearing in my head a small, off the cuff remark that Kim Merker said one day as we were having a coffee break in the press at Iowa. He said, “I like the letterpress because I can stop the machine at any time, walk away and come back to it.” I can stop at any time, I can stop at any time, I can stop at any time. Somehow that notion is at the root of my idea of sustainability, and maybe our conversation in March will help me come closer to understanding why and how. Yes, I grow my own food, I raise my own meat animals. I build soil. I grow grass. I remodel my own houses with materials I recycle, and I can stop at any time; I can invent a new solution; I can make shit up as I go along, and make sense of it and be surprised by it and be enlightened by it, and

Simon Cutts, [Coracle Press](#): I’ve forgotten, but it just keeps going on. A kind of perversity, seeing how badly things can be done, and getting to know how simply they can be done. A kind of perversity, to deny conventional economic structures, to be in charge of the means of production, to just want to make something, with materials, as an objective correlative to ideas. Then to realize that certain things have to be done, or else they will disappear.

Response to “Publishers’ Roundtable: Getting Started”

[Buzz Spector](#) Says: [March 2, 2008 at 5:35 pm](#) [edit](#)

Between 1975-88 I produced various editioned works, books among them, under the heading “The Press of Events.” I conceived of this operation as a rubric under which the reference to publishing was joined to performative gestures. The best known of these was MEMORIES, a boxed set of 12 pencils, each embossed with a line of my poetry, but there was also PRESS, a set of nine rubber stamps with ream of paper, MEDALS, a set of six metal disks with stamped text, and two books: the first of these, published in 1987, was DOUBLE READINGS, in offset edition, containing various dustjacket photographs of authors, portions of the blurbs from their books, and installation views of my installation of found stacked books at Chicago’s Randolph St. Gallery. The next year I published ON THE CAPE, a collaboration with my friend, the poet Reagan Upshaw.

We were vacationing together in 1987, with our families, in Orleans, at the elbow of Cape Cod, and set ourselves the task of writing the words and drawing the pictures for a chapbook. My efforts at the time were rather desultory; I carried my paper, pencils, and bottles of ink to the bayside beach each day and drew such detritus as washed up in my immediate vicinity while watching the Upshaw daughters at play. I’m still found of my ink drawings of a dead stingray and the silhouettes of bathers against a sunset, but none of the drawings I made in Orleans appear in the published book. When Upshaw sent me his finished writing, some six months later, the eloquence and scope of the poem seemed to require something more expansive than those sketches; instead, I used collaged bits and pieces of old Cape Cod postcards, plus a single drawing in the book’s center, a brushy ink on paper copy after one of Mondrian’s early versions of “Pier + Ocean.” I superimposed this on a found photoreproduction of a ship’s wake receding toward the horizon with seagulls gliding overhead.

I frequently made reference to the art of De Stijl in my studio practice of the time; visual paraphrase, in collage/paintings, from Van Doesburg, Van Der Leck, Mondrian, and, most often, Georges Vantongerloo. The historicism verging on nostalgia in that work is present, perhaps best of all, on those pages of ON THE CAPE.