

# INTERVIEW WITH KYLE SCHLESINGER

M. Scott Craig

msc: Can you describe the connection you feel between independent publishing and the visual arts?

ks: From my perspective, the relationship between independent publishing and the visual arts really begins with writing and the visual arts, insofar as writing predates ‘publishing’ as such. Concepts of the copy, reproduction, and originality were altered radically by the introduction of the printing press, and the press introduced a certain concept of publishing, a term that’s usually associated with the seeds of industrialism and the ability to reproduce massive, even miniscule, amounts of information. However, writing and art predate the handpress era, making the history of publishing appear relatively brief indeed. One could consider the Paleolithic cave paintings of Lascaux, the Cueva de las Manos of Argentina, the Cuneiform clay tablets, or Chinese woodblock printing the ancestors of text/image integration, to name a few well-known highlights along the way. The written word must have a body in order to express meaning; the body has an inherent aesthetic value, a visual form of expression that even in its most familiar, transparent, invisible form, has the ability to signify on multiple levels. These forms are where design principles, history, theory, and the imagination converge and the conversation about art and writing in book form and beyond begin. The paradox is that now, that we have thousands of digital fonts coupled with very sophisticated software, things look more homogeneous than ever.

I was talking with the poet and artist David Abel last night about creating some sort of anthology where an unspecified number of contributors would be invited to render a poem on the page using any media they please—typewriters, pen, letterpress, silkscreen, knife, finger paint, photography, collage, etc. Wouldn’t it be interesting to see all of these interpretations of a single text bound together as a book?

Contemporary artists like David have been exploring these relationships for a long time, drawing from an expansive and dizzying array of deep historical precedents as well as more recent 20th-century art movements that were directly involved with independent publishing and the visual arts, ranging from the Dadaists to the Futurists to Arts and Crafts and Fluxus and so on. And of course the writings of visual artists have always been of great interest to me, even when those artists are not primarily associated with artists’ books or known primarily for their writings. One could think of Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, Agnes Martin, Stan Brakhage, Yvonne Rainer, Fairfield Porter, or Philip Guston, for example, as sources of inspiration. Then there’s the great tradition of poet-critics like Frank O’Hara, Bill Berkson, John Ashbery, and all of the contemporary artists and filmmakers who use language in their art like Michael Snow, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Conner, and so on. I don’t mean to sound superficial by simply dropping the names of all these terrific artists and writers without elaborating, I just want to get back to your excellent question and say that the relationship between independent publishing and the visual arts is a marvelous and sprawling field that has a long, heavily textured and nuanced history.

msc: In your works, such as *Hello Helicopter*, you form a very unique dynamic between the text and the page, including multi-text on given pages. What goes through your mind when that creation is forming?

ks: Most books printed in the West are supposed to be read left to right, top to bottom, front to back. Paratexts, such as the page numbers or the running headers or footers tend to disappear when the reader is



Kyle Schlesinger printing *BUMPERS* during his residency at the Center for Book and Paper Arts, Columbia College Chicago, 2011, photo by B. Freeman

immersed in the primary text. This would be the case in a conventional novel, for example, while the design of a newspaper, magazine, or website introduces a much more complicated, nonlinear, and hierarchical network of relationships. Unless engaging in some sort of conceptual exercise, no one reads a newspaper left to right, top to bottom, front to back, crossing columns and ignoring the ‘continued on page number...’. In poetic form, I sometimes call attention to these conventions and habits where, for example, in a more recent book, *What You Will*, if one were to read the titles of the individual poems front to back, they would see that the colloquial language and particularly short lines create a poem that resembles those elsewhere in the book, and that becomes apparent when you look at the table of contents. But that’s just part of the poet’s job, part of the art of the book’s design, to challenge assumptions about the way meaning is generated through language. And formal devices such as design, typography, structure, and so on can contribute to that.

“Moonlighting,” one of the poems in *Hello Helicopter*, is a prose poem where a few of the lines are printed in large italic letters below the blocks, so the reader may be inclined to address the hierarchy, start with the headlines or display text, moving verso to recto or recto to verso before circling back around to the denser, more demanding text. The poem was first printed in

an edition of one hundred as a stand-alone chapbook when I was living in Berlin, and there was a shop that carried this marvelous rainbow-colored vellum that served as a jacket in about a quarter of the copies. The text was set against bright, bleeding, full-color photographs I had taken of the sky. The images are printed continuously on the sheets, so once the book is folded and collated to create a simple pamphlet, the gutter becomes the center of attention, a dividing line where two texts and two images intersect, adding another element to the asynchronous relationship between time and space in the book.

That said, I've published a number of books that may be considered artist's books, although I don't work exclusively in that medium. I write a lot of poems that get published in no-frills magazines or online journals, and, like my essays and criticism, I have no particular idea about how the poem should be presented. Once in a while I'll get an idea for a book where the writing and book form relate to one another, and I know that most publishers wouldn't be willing or interested in doing something so unconventional, so I do it myself, and working with the materials is of course part of the process, so changes are inevitable. Just like the process of writing, making an edition is also largely a form of editing, revising, improvising. Bill Berkson shared a lovely anecdote with me that I'll repeat here, where a century ago in Paris, the painter Degas had lamented that his poems weren't any good though his ideas were wonderful, and the poet Mallarmé responded, "But my dear Degas, poems are made of words, not ideas." And of course, he was right!

msc: At what point did you realize that artists' books were to be such a vital part of your life? What did that mean to you when it sank in?

ks: I guess the great thing about it is that it's still sinking in, so maybe artists' books weren't so much a 'realization' as an inspiring confluence of people, places, ideas, and, of course, books that I consider myself very fortunate to have encountered. In my early twenties I was interested in sculpture and poetry, more or less as entities, but also the relationship I alluded to earlier between artists and writers, many affiliated with Black Mountain College. A few of my teachers were students there, and so that history and tradition feels very near, and the books published by Jonathan Williams' Jargon Society continue to be a source of inspiration and delight. Most of my friends at the time were painters, and the idea of having a studio appealed to me—having a place to go, a place to sit and think and look, the chance to work it all out on a big canvas like de Kooning or Guston or something like that seem very romantic, very appealing. Letterpress proved to be a way to work physically with language, a very satisfying way to bring writing and visual art together, and thinking back now it seems that I had probably been printing and looking at books for five years or so before I heard the term "artists' books."

At the University at Buffalo, where I earned my Ph.D., I was involved with what came to be known as the 'unauthorized unilateral Perishable Press Limited exhibition at The Grolier Club' in Manhattan. They have a remarkable library that has almost every book or magazine of poetry in English published in the 20th and 21st centuries, plus a slew of literary archives, related works of art, etc. Anyhow, I was asked to write a bibliography that included every book produced by the printer and book artist Walter Hamady, whose Gabberjabbs and handsome books of poetry by writers like Paul Blackburn, Toby Olson, Robert Creeley, and Jerome Rothenberg made a distinct impression on me because they very consciously demonstrated that all aspects of the book were integrated. He was making his own paper, setting type with his wife, Mary, printing everything by hand in rural Wisconsin, all the while growing some of their own food, splitting wood for the stove, building stone walls, making babies, you know, almost a back to the land attitude. I took a couple trips to the Press' archives, and that experience afforded me the opportunity to read thousands of letters between Walter and the writers, illustrators, and artisans involved in the making of a book, giving me a real appreciation for the craft, but, more importantly, the process and possibilities of the book that are revealed in the conversation surrounding, what one could call, a collaboration between poet and publisher, as well as the artisans Hamady commissioned—some of the letters from Paul Hayden Duensing were amazing.

When Terry Belanger heard about the debacle (the curator of the exhibit forgot to inform Walter about his own retrospective!), he generously invited me to Rare Books School for a one-week seminar on artists' books with Johanna Drucker. We looked at hundreds of books and read many of

the major texts in the field at that time, and met guest speakers like Brad Freeman, so my world really expanded from thinking of the artists' book as something closer to the private press tradition (handmade paper, letterpress, sophisticated bindings, etc.) to a sprawling survey that included a much more diverse selection that often pushed the boundaries and definitions of the book, books that were more in concert with various art and literary movements, and works that occluded classification altogether. That week was one of those irrevocable moments when your perception shifts ever so slightly, and there's no going back. I think I still have my notebook from the time, where I began drawing sketches of the books I wanted to print when I got back home, and they look completely unlike anything I had published previously, so, yes, a transitional moment for certain.

msc: Who were some of your early influences?

ks: The first literature I really remember reading on my own, getting excited about, wasn't that unusual for a kid growing up in New England: Melville, Hawthorn, Thoreau, Dickinson, Emerson, Whitman. Then in my late teens and early twenties it was the *New American Poetry*. Not a bad start I suppose. Visual art and artists' books didn't come till college.

msc: Although there are many closely-related definitions of an artists' book, and each one seems to have the same underlying statement, but with its own personal touch, what is your reason for an artists' book?

ks: Barnett Newman once said "Aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for birds," and although I'm being light, I think it might be fair to say the same for artists' books. I'm obviously not against theory, but I think definitions are just an aspect of a broader discourse that never really succeeds in meeting the art on an ontological level insofar as definitions rarely measure up to the thing itself. You could think of Wittgenstein here, where it's fairly easy to say "hand me the slab" but hard to say "tell me what cinnamon tastes like." I'd like to think that every artists' book I encounter, every book artist I meet, has the potential to alter my perception of what artists' books are and what they do. The important thing is to keep contributing to the conversation, to refine the vocabulary we use to talk about artists' books, to look at the classics in the field in new ways, and make way for new works of art by emerging artists to reach others.

msc: What is the process and main goal for you when working on an artists' book?

ks: Like music, it's a precarious balance between art and craft, improvisation and staying in tune. And, of course, looking back at the results after a day's work with fresh eyes to see what sticks and what ships is critical, getting that particular vantage or distance. The funny thing about process is that as soon as you can articulate or anticipate your own patterns it's time to go in a different direction. When I look at my books, there are certain qualities that I can discern as my own, and that's fine, but what makes artists' books a little bit different from the 'art world' proper is that there are very few of us, even the most successful pioneers in the field, who are pressured to make *another* "Clifton Meador," or *another* "Betsy Davids," or *another* "Emily McVarish." Please don't interpret this as a slight, it's why Clif and Betsy are more important to me than Richard Prince and Damien Hirst. The commercial aspect of artists' books, for better or worse, is relatively minor compared to the art world proper, and in some ways overlaps with the very generous independent press scene that I'm also involved with. We share ideas, support each other through reading series, reviews, essays, magazines, and so on, and this gives us a relatively communal and agreeable environment to explore, where we can put the work first and worry about the rest later. The freedom from big-ticket commoditization allows you to be a little more nimble, a little more on top of your game. More mainstream artists are more commercial, far less generous with one another in my experience. I don't think that's really answering your question, but . . .

msc: How has the concept and reception of artists' books changed over the last several decades? Or has it?

ks: Like everything else, it's difficult to talk about the changes of the last

couple decades without invoking the language of new media, and this is true of artists' book discourse as well. At the turn of the century, the future of the book looked bleak, as it did in the century that preceded it. Was it Twain that said, "history doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes." Anyway, the world was going digital and many worried that the internet was going to replace the codex, and it has to some degree, and in some ways I'm quite happy about that. I don't need another telephone book delivered to my door whether I want them or not—the Yellow Pages online works just as well as the original: they're both essentially databases. Newspapers and other ephemeral modes of communication that convey simple information which have been printed as cheaply as possible, for as long as possible, should logically find a home in the digital realm because the medium frees the publisher of restrictions on color images and other printing costs, and it allows them to produce audio and video elements that are not available in print. Generally speaking, we've become comfortable with the paperless office, and important information such as photographs, correspondence, and drafts that one would find in an archive will die with the hard drive—even 'clouds' are subject to climate change. I anticipate that historians and scholars interested in the early 21st century two hundred years from now will encounter some serious problems in their research, but research methods will have to change dramatically, and the current nonextant funding for the humanities makes that learning curve seem awfully steep.

I don't find that the digital medium lends itself deep or prolonged reading. I can't read poetry online, but it's a great medium for listening. The Threads Talk Series for book artists that I curate with Steve Clay at PennSound lends itself to the audio world online, and is much more effective than sending out cassette tapes as we would have twenty years ago, or CDs ten years ago. If you want to read a thriller or romance novel on the airplane, I think the e-book is a brilliant alternative to the disposable paperback. But you can't read Stein on the iPad.

msc: While social marketing can be an effective tool for mainstream works and authors, do you think it has enough power to propel artists' books into a larger public view?

ks: Sure, but everything's relative. That said, a lot of people were worried that putting digital images of an artists' book online would detract from the value of said book, of the original printed version, and, of course, only the opposite has proven true. I've been writing about this problem of scarcity and originality and what that means for new media and the codex recently.

Anyway, a lot of innovative work is being done now, not because of the computer, but because every generation does interesting things, regardless of the medium or media available in their time. New media serves as a research tool, a production tool, and a tool for composition itself. Everything from digital archives to artists' books created specifically for the online environment, to listservs, blogs, and journals devoted to artists' books, to say nothing of print-on-demand technologies, digital typography, the photopolymer plate, etc., has changed the game for book artists. I think that screen culture has brought a whole new generation to the art of the book, a generation that is completely bored and disenchanted by Power Point presentations, digital videos, GPS, social networking, and smart phone ADD fidgeting. New media presents an opportunity to see old media differently, and now more people, especially the young people who are interested in artists' books, are starting to understand this.

msc: As people mention artists' books as artists, artist's, and artists', is the apostrophe just for possessive purposes? Why are apostrophes so important in life, or what significantly do they represent?

ks: I couldn't add anything significant to the evolution of the apostrophe in artists' books discourse that Stefan Klima hasn't already stated in *Artists' Books*. That was published by Granary Books in 1998, and I would say that at the time, from my perspective, there may have been more of a preoccupation with the apostrophe than there is now. Maybe these days people also seem less concerned with the definition of artists' books as well as the rivaling histories. I finished high school the year Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* came out, so I obviously wasn't privy to these conversations then, but, from a scholarly perspective, I miss that tension of the nineties. I think that it was a critical and invaluable part of initiating a discourse; the

materials have, of course, been there all along, but I don't think it was really until the nineties that it was theorized and historicized of as such. Clive Phillpot, Riva Castleman, Gerald Lange, Johanna Drucker, Alastair Johnston, Joan Lyons, they all had and have their own, well-informed ways of looking at things, and they weren't the only ones. Everyone had something to bring to the table, agree or disagree. Who could find the most obscure antecedent of this or that artists' book was also a preoccupation, one that I appreciate immensely. Music, painting, all forms of art work similarly, but part of what makes artists' books special is the fact that every major movement I can think of in contemporary art had a relationship to the art of the book, which is not to say that it's an orphan art so much as it is to say that the medium is highly seductive.

msc: Are there any particular trends in the publishing world you are following right now?

ks: I'm not sure if 'trends' is the right word, but at the risk of sounding like a prophet, I would say that I think something very special will happen when digital books and artists' books meet in a meaningful way in the near future. It will take time, but I think there's a lot of potential. The online world is a nightmare. Even some of the most expensive corporate websites are a disaster—have you booked a flight on American Airlines recently? Anyway, there have been a lot of interesting attempts to bring the artists' book and the ebook together, but, if you ask me, it hasn't quite clicked. That said, the digital age is all incunabula, and it will still be incunabula when I'm dead. Today, I think people are bored out of their skulls on the computer. They look at screens all day long, from the moment they put on the coffee and read *The New York Times* on their iPads in the morning, on to the day job for eight or nine hours, to messaging on the smart phone on the way home, then paying bills, shopping, and banking after dinner, and finally watching a movie on NetFlix at night to 'unwind.'

Anyone who knows me will tell you that I'm not a sentimental person. I cringe when someone tells me that they prefer books to ebooks because of the way they smell, or because they like the feeling of paper, etc., especially if they're talking about disposable paperbacks. Artists' books pick up where that shortsighted sentiment leaves off. There's a great desire to be re-engage with material, be it a book or something else that involves touching something other than a keyboard, reading something that makes the mind work differently than the screen, which for some reason, tends to place meaning close to the surface. There's a lot of it, meaning and information, and it is malleable, but devoid of force, devoid of whatever substance it is that has made writing an aid to memory for thousands of years, whatever it is that gives us goose bumps, makes us cry, laugh uncontrollably, or throw the book against the wall. Like the digital medium itself, the memory muscle is also getting soft—I can always look it up later.

But if I wasn't critical, it would only suggest that I don't care, and I do care greatly about the future of literacy. The demand is here for something more engaging than an ebook, more engaging than a traditional paperback, smarter than Facebook, something that reminds us of the place of the book in the world, and the place of the world in the book, the books that take us out of this world, and the words that bring us back to our place in it.