



Kyle Schlesinger talking with Miles Champion, Ted Greenwald and Tom Raworth in Gramercy Park (Spring, 2009). Photo by Tom Raworth.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KYLE SCHLESINGER conducted by ROB McLENNAN

KYLE SCHLESINGER writes and lectures on poetry, visual communication and artists' books. For nearly a decade, he has been the proprietor of Cuneiform Press, a nonprofit publisher specializing in poetry, artists' books and typography. He is the author of *Poems & Pictures: A Renaissance in the Art of the Book*, published in conjunction with an exhibit of the same name and half-a-dozen books of poetry. Schlesinger is an Assistant Professor of Communication Design and English at the University of Houston-Victoria. This interview was conducted online, and originally appeared on Rob McLennan's website late in 2010.

RM: When did Cuneiform Press first start? How have your original goals as a publisher shifted since you started, if at all? And what have you learned through the process?

KS: Historically, printing preceded publishing, and that's true of my own involvement with both activities. I'm not sure if I think of myself as a publisher, and I'm sure I didn't think of myself as one ten years ago. Jeremy James Thompson once usefully remarked that a publisher's job is essentially to pay the bills, deliver a product, oversee sales, and other aspects of the day-to-day operation of a business. That's a big part of it. A publisher is sometimes an editor and less-often-than-sometimes a printer or bookmaker. In the small press world, James Laughlin, John Martin, Steve Clay, and even Jonathan Williams are wonderful publishers, but they don't actually print or design their books.

Charles Alexander, Alastair Johnston, Asa Benveniste, and Harry Duncan have a slightly different orientation. My interest has always been in how language comes to mean, particularly, how poetry works as a material, visual, and textual form of art. This manifests in many ways, from the more conventional codex to artists' books as concept, archetype, and form. In that way, advertising, mail art, and text & image collaborations share a vocabulary.

I began printing in the '90s when I bought my first press, a George Prouty and Sons platen, along with a bit of type and other necessities from a couple in rural Vermont. Inspired by the work of one of my teachers at that time who had served the campus printer at Black Mountain College, I decided to teach myself how to set type and operate the machine. He had studied with Joseph Albers (and this is long before Charles Olson's time as rector) and his printing from that period reflected the Bauhaus aesthetic: sans serif type; red, black, and yellow ink; all lowercase. No full stops—straight from Weimar to North Carolina! Friends and I tinkered with the press and printed all kinds of sloppy stuff: Julia Kristeva bookmarks; stationery for Gertrude Stein; instructions for using a compost toilet; as well as playbills; and posters for the school lecture series.

It wasn't until 2001 that I 'published' a chapbook for a friend, just for the fun of it. I say that because there was no manifesto, no sponsorship, no business model, no ambition to overthrow the establishment, etc. I just had a great poetry manuscript and enough Bembo type to get the job done (Bembo was Larry Fagin's idea). The book had some flaws in its design (including an upside-down 's' on the cover!), but I still like the poems. Now that Cuneiform is coming up on ten years, I'm fairly certain that having fun is still the first priority. Printing books and ephemera is just a small way of contributing to the community of writers that are doing the most important work today, and I'm very humbled and happy to be a part of it.

RM: What first brought you to publishing?

KS: I read books. I write books. I design books. I print and bind books. I write about books. I edit books. I teach books. I buy books. I sell books. I donate books. I study books. I blog books. I review books. I recycle books. I read and write books-about-books and even read and write reviews about books-about-books. I deface and destroy books. I'm not alone. One of the things I like most about being a bibliophile is that it's a surprising social occupation: *everyone* has an opinion about books. A favorite book, author or library. A favorite font. Pro or anti-kindle. What about Facebook? An uncle who was a linotype operator, a cousin who mimeographed the church newsletter, a friend who wrote a novel and never published it. All of this interests me, whereas, when I introduce myself as a 'poet' to the guy sitting next to me at the airport, the conversation usually doesn't go very far. I'm quite committed to the idea that theory is never more than practice, that the tradition of printing, design and publishing is never more than a history of innovation. Engaging with that history is essential if one really wants to try to do something new. Seeing and reading books by Johanna Drucker, Ed Ruscha, Dick Higgins, Graham Mackintosh, Clifford Burke, Jack Stauffacher, Wallace Berman, Jan Tschichold, Gelett Burgess, William Morris, William Blake, William Caxton, Gutenberg's bible, and so much in-between set me off: the book itself is a form of research, a way of finding one's self in one's time. It's a totally exhilarating, physically satisfying, and yes, totally monotonous, trivial and tedious occupation at the same time.

RM: What do you consider the role and responsibilities, if any, of small publishing?

KS: Contributing to the growth of a community of thoughtful, intellectual, and engaged writers and readers is central. You do this all the time on your blog, through your readings and writings, and I

appreciate it. One falls into a lifestyle. Producing books that are challenging, beautiful, and interesting is also important. The poetry world is usefully small, which is virtuous in its own way, but it also puts a cap on what we can do politically. This may be part of the reason I think it is important for printers, publishers and designers to volunteer to support organizations that will reach a wider audience, whatever the cause. I'm less committed to advancing the work of esoteric poets whose work is overtly concerned with advancing a particular social or political cause than I am to doing a little pro bono work for an organization that will reach a wider audience. Ginsberg, Dylan, Waldman, and Baraka are among the few American poets I admire who really had the ability to mobilize the masses.

That said, the small press is the only way the face of literature has, or will ever change. As the larger presses (and I mean digital too) continue to consolidate and become more homogenous the small presses continue to diversify and represent cultures and aesthetics that are underserved. Now that anyone with access to a laptop computer can technically become a 'publisher' using free, user-friendly online publishing software like Blogger or print-on-demand technologies, one has to wonder what, if any specialization is required of a publisher? What place does the publisher have in the world today? I guess I'm asking the same question as you.

RM: What do you see your press doing that no one else is?

KS: *Mimeo Mimeo* is a periodical published by Cuneiform that I co-edit with Jed Birmingham. The focus is on artists' books, typography, and the mimeo revolution. We wanted to create a space where *Fine Print*, *Journal of Artists Books*, and any number of poetry magazines of the latter-half of the twentieth century (*Floating Bear*, *Fuck You*, *Adventures in Poetry*, *Big Sky*, etc.) might intersect. We're about to publish our 4th issue with a focus on the British Poetry Revival. So far as I know, no one's ever done anything quite like this before, tho we're totally indebted to Steve Clay and Rodney Phillips's *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side* book and exhibition at the New York Public Library. We handle most of the distribution ourselves, so we're always kind of shocked when we get an order from Iceland or Romania or a suburb of Des Moines, Iowa. *Mimeo Mimeo* is very much a part of our own research and collecting, while I also see it tied to the larger agenda of Cuneiform's devotion to the intersection of poetry, typography, and artists' books.

RM: What do you see as the most effective way to get new books out into the world?

KS: Simon Cutts has written magnificently on the complicated subject of distribution in his book *Some Forms of Availability* and elsewhere. It's an imperfect system, one that is always active, always changing. Look at any library and try to explain how it was assembled. Fascinating. I recently sent out at least 1,000 postcards for a new Charles Olson book to be published by Cuneiform, and Amiri Baraka was the only one who actually wrote a check for twenty bucks and put it in the mailbox. The postal system doesn't work for advertising, but everyone loves getting goodies in the mail. Checkbooks are obsolete. FaceBook is an addiction, a good way to get information moving around, but it doesn't serve as a medium for productive discussion. You 'like' it or you move on. The Poetics Listserv was a great source of conversation and information for some time, then attention began to move towards blogs, but of course a lot of people say the blog is obsolete. So is the Tweet. It's all in flux now, as the ever-present debate whether or not to do away with analog entirely makes the question of buying a particular book an arbitrary decision at best. Sales of romance novels are booming on the e-book market because they can be bought, sold, and read in private—no boobs or biceps on the cover to distract strangers on the train! But poetry, as we've seen in the recent e-book version of Ginsberg's *Howl*, has a long way to go before it's legible online. That bugs me, so I may well take the press in that direction.

RM: How involved an editor are you? Do you dig deep into line edits, or do you prefer more of a light touch?

KS: I give a manuscript my unconditional support or I don't bother to comment on it at all. I never make editorial suggestions outside of basic proofreading or typographical inquiries. That said, I do ask a lot of questions of authors and try to learn as much about the manuscript as possible. I should also mention that I have a policy that I read everything (or as close to everything as possible) that an author has written *and* about that author before I publish one of their books. In addition to providing me with a better understanding of their oeuvre, it also gives me a sense of how their other books were designed. I line all of their books up on the shelf and consider how their Cuneiform title will sit with all the others in terms of the spine's height, width, color, etc.

RM: How do your books get distributed? What are your usual print runs?

KS: People can buy our books from Small Press Distribution or through our website. They are also available from a dozen very cool, very personal, independent bookstores in the US, Canada, and Europe. Vamp & Tramp sells for us, along with a handful of other dealers whose sales are primarily online or by appointment only. Most runs are between 250 and 1,000, tho if something is produced in my workshop by hand there might only be a couple copies. Do it and move on. Those go directly to friends, patrons of the press and a handful of special collections libraries.

RM: How many other people are involved with editing or production? Do you work with other editors, and if so, how effective do you find it? What are the benefits, drawbacks?

KS: Informally, there have always been a lot of people involved with Cuneiform. I've taught dozens of letterpress workshops, seminars on the history of the book, guest-lectures, etc. and many of my friends and former students have gone on to set up their own presses. That's not part of the nuts-and-bolts of the editing and production, but I consider quality dialogue and community to be at the core of Cuneiform's mission beyond making books. Or better yet, that dialogue is an essential part of the making books. There's a whole lot of conversation and correspondence always happening, so I don't think I've really ever done anything alone, but at the end of the day, it's just me. No board-of-directors, no staff, no hired hands aside from the folks in Michigan who print our trade editions. As I mentioned earlier, Jed and I edit *Mimeo Mimeo* together, where we both pitch in on ideas, editing, and design. My friends are always sending me books in the mail, links to new poems online, curating readings, attending conferences, circulating research, magazines, videos, and audio recordings. All of this helps to inform my decisions about what, when, and how to read.

In addition to running the press, I'm heading up a new graduate program specializing in publishing in Victoria, Texas. As part of the curriculum, students work with me on the Cuneiform books, which is a relatively new, but welcome change. I believe that consensus is the gateway drug to mediocrity, so we never design that way; but having a forum for discussion, research, and presentation is a wonderful opportunity to hash out our ideas. It certainly takes some of the isolation out of certain projects, and for the students, I think it's a golden opportunity to move beyond the realm of dormant 'exercises' and an excuse to contribute to an actual publication.

RM: How has being an editor/publisher changed the way you think about your own writing?

KS: It's hard to say, since I've basically been an editor/publisher for as long as I've been a writer. I would imagine that if I wasn't constantly looking at poetry and criticism from the inside out as an editor (books from the inside out as a printer), I might view it from the outside in as a reader. Nothing is ever *finished*. The book is never *done*. No work is *complete*. An old friend of mine, a painter, once told

me that he can't walk into a museum and not feel an urge to get back to the studio to paint, or the desire to take a brush to the work hanging before him on the wall. I can appreciate that.

RM: How do you approach the idea of publishing your own writing? Some, such as Gary Geddes when he still ran Cormorant, refused such, yet various Coach House Press editors had titles during their tenures as editors for the press, including Victor Coleman and bpNichol. What do you think of the arguments for or against, or do you see the whole question as irrelevant?

KS: When Johanna Drucker sent me the manuscript *From Now* (Cuneiform Press, 2005), she explained that she produced her artists' books independently, while she sent her texts to publishers. By drawing this distinction between 'texts' and 'artists books,' I think she meant that when she has an idea for a book where the form and the content are irrevocably intertwined, or somehow contingent upon the process of composing and/or writing, she pursues it on her own as an artist's book under the Druckwerk imprint. Whereas, if there's basically a text, a sequence of letters, words, sentences, etc. that don't require a specific format or treatment, she turns it over to a publisher. That would certainly be true of the scholarly books of hers that have been published by academic presses. I tend to think similarly about my own work. Her statement clarified something important that I had been trying to articulate at the time. I've produced and distributed a number of artists' books through Cuneiform that contain my own writing, images, design, etc. but I send my 'texts' out to publishers I respect. In those cases, I really don't have a very strong opinion about the presentation of the work. Actually, my next book is called *What You Will* and it will be brought out by NewLights Press in 2011. Knowing that the manuscript was going to a printer and artist I like very much, 'do what you will' was my only thought on the design, and seemed like an appropriate title. I've seen some of the proofs, which are out of this world. Aaron Cohick is as good as they come. I certainly don't think there's anything 'wrong' with self-publishing, in fact, many of my favorite books were self-published or published with the help of a friend, etc. Often, this is where the most ambitious and creative thinking gets done, so I'm all for it. Coleman and Nichol were doing the kind of 'self-publishing' I admire. My greater concern is the centralization of the mainstream news, major publishing houses, radio, film, and television. That kind of monopoly over our essential information that comes closer to the kind of 'self-publishing' I condemn.

RM: How do you see Cuneiform Press evolving?

KS: We used to publish chapbooks by emerging poets, but we're doing less of that these days. They cost as much as, if not more than trade editions to produce, but they rarely get reviewed. Nobody buys them, even if there's only a few hundred copies produced from the outset. I'm not sure if there's really even any reason to sit around sewing or stapling photocopies now that the first fully-computer literate generation of writers are well-established in and outside the academy. A lot of young writers have half a dozen books out by the time they're thirty! I'm not opposed to that, I just don't know if I have a place in it, aside from championing the work of the individuals I admire. Cuneiform has never been associated with any particular school or movement, and I think that must reflect the eclectic nature of my own reading as well as the small press at large. I've always thought it would be interesting to teach a class where we read the books of a certain press, rather than an author, movement or period. Could you imagine anything more disruptive and various? It could be wonderful.

Alan Loney's *The Books to Come* was the first in our new series on typography. It was a huge success, the culmination of years of writing on the art of the book by one of the greatest contemporary

authorities on the subject we have. This will be followed by Alastair Johnston's collection of interviews with poets, typographers and publishers entitled *Hanging Quotes*, due out this spring. I will continue to publish at least one trade book of poems and one artist's book a year. I had always scoffed at systems, but began using ISBN numbers and barcodes for the first time this year, obtained non-profit status, etc. so after ten years of more or less spontaneous production on a break-even-quick budget, a bit of regularity has taken shape.

I'm also really happy to have acquired Michael Waltuch's Vandercook. This is the one he used to print Whale Cloth books. All letterpress, gorgeous early works by Kit Robinson, Alan Bernheimer, Bob Grenier, and others. Dan Morris at the Arm in Brooklyn helped me pick it up in Massachusetts, polished it up, and shipped it to me in Austin. Dan is the best. I've got new rollers, fixed the motor, fixed the trip, and have been staying up late this week sorting type while I wait for the guides and packing to come from NA Graphics via UPS. The new pressroom is almost ready—the first time I've had a private workshop.

RM: What, as a publisher, are you most proud of accomplishing? What do you think people have overlooked about your publications? What is your biggest frustration?

KS: I couldn't have done, or do anything without great manuscripts and great books to guide me. I don't know if I've accomplished much, but I have been fortunate to access incredible people and resources. I don't think there's ever been a more interesting time to get into publishing.

RM: Who were your early publishing models when starting out?

KS: Aldus, Aldus, and Aldus. That's true, to some degree, but more to the point, it was a lot of trial and error. I sent the books, and continue to send the books, to the writers and publishers I like. Paul Romaine, now the president of the American Printing History Association, would send me detailed critiques of the books. His interest in poetry stopped at Milton or Pope, so he always had a completely fresh take on things. Terry Belanger at Rare Books School was also a great proponent of tough love. Same goes for Walter Hamady. I don't know if these were models, but I was very moved by their work and words.

RM: How does Cuneiform Press work to engage with your immediate literary community, and community at large? What journals or presses do you see Cuneiform Press in dialogue with? How important do you see those dialogues, those conversations?

KS: Gosh, that's a tough one. But a good one. Today is December 13, 2010. On the *Mimeo Mimeo* blog I wrote about a new Kate Greenstreet postcard with art by Cherie Weaver published by Cindy St. John's Headlamp Press. I also wrote about the second issue of Ben Tripp's side-stapled, letter-size, mimeo-ish mag called *Gerry Mulligan*, as well as a new broadside printed letterpress by Jon Beacham of The Brother in Elysium. Plus a beautiful book printed by Friedrich Kerkisiek at the Small Fires Press by Emily Kendal Grey. It's called *Feelings Using Wolves*. Scott Pierce of Effing Press came over for a bit to say hello and to check out the new paper cutter I bought last week. I emailed a bit with: Geoffrey Gatzka at BlazeVox about Bill Berkson's new book; Ryan Murphy (a letterpress printer who publishes under many different imprints); the Perdika Press out of the UK about Berkson's new chapbook *Lady Air*; Michael Waltuch of Whale Cloth Press about an interview; and Michael Klausman, a poet of the highest order and record dealer who will be curating an exhibition of poets' lps for the next issue of *Mimeo Mimeo*. At the post office, I sent some broadsides to David Abel in Portland, Anne Waldman in NYC, and Deborah Poe at Pace University. Postcards thanking Edric Mesmer for the most recent issue of *Yellow Field* and Les Figures Press for Mathew Timmons' *The New Poetics* were also sent. That's a day, or an example.

RM: Do you hold regular or occasional readings or launches? How important do you see public readings and other events?

KS: In New York, I worked at the Poetry Project as a curator. I enjoyed it, but since I moved to Austin, I haven't gotten involved in planning readings, tho my family did host a house reading by David Abel on a whim when he came to town and it turned out to be a lot of fun. I'm attracted to the live reading in the same way that I'm attracted to the bookstore; I can listen to many of my favorite contemporary writers on PennSound or Ubu but I still enjoy a live reading, much in the way that I prefer the movie theatre to a DVD, a concert to the MP3. It's really about the experience, and in terms of live entertainment, poetry is just about the cheapest date you can get.

RM: How do you utilize the internet, if at all, to further your goals?

KS: Boy, what doesn't happened online? In one way or another? Eventually? I'm doing more research on e-books and interactive design these days, so there's a good chance that we'll be distributing in analog and digital formats soon.

RM: Do you take submissions? If so, what *aren't* you looking for?

KS: No, no submissions. Most of the work is commissioned or casually solicited. I like Rich Owens' claim that the word 'submission' suggests that the writer is inferior, lesser-than the editor or publisher. Contributor, on the other hand, suggests something of a symbiotic relationship between writer and publisher. Stone soup. I've never wanted to get involved with the world of prizes and awards, the business of creating false visions of affirmation that pray on writers' insecurities. I can't think of anything more damaging to the face of literature. A lot of small presses go that route to make a few bucks but I don't think there's much to be gained. Writing (and receiving) 'rejection letters' is a huge waste of everyone's time. If you're a good editor you're paying attention, constantly asking writers you like what they're reading, buying the new little magazines, supporting other small presses, going out to readings, taking it all in. I'd much rather go out looking for the work than stay in the office waiting for 'something to publish' to show up at the door.

RM: Tell me about three of your most recent titles, and why they're special.

KS: Cuneiform's three most recent books are Kit Robinson's *Determination*, Michael Cross' *Haecceities* and Alan Loney's *The Books to Come*. The latter gathers together, for the first time, Loney's radical essays that eloquently speak to the relationships between philosophy, poetry, and the art of the book. His tone is calm and meditative, while on a formal level, the book resembles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*. *Haecceities* is also the culmination of many years of work by one of the most energetic, yet slowest, poets I know. Cross is a serious OED junkie, a poet who works with the syllable rather than the line or strophe as his primary unit of thought, or sound. The poems push against the edge another language, reflecting the complex rhythms of Peter Brotzmann, metronome of Grandmaster Flash, and philosophical preoccupations of Badiou. Robinson's book came in yesterday's mail. It's a juicy collection of poems from the last ten years or so, the first trade edition since *The Messianic Trees*. Robinson is among the writers I respect most these days. Perhaps it has something to do with my own age, but I have a growing respect for writers who have put out a dozen books or more with consistent integrity. There's so much overproduction, so much misguided ambition in publishing today that it's really satisfying to sit down with something that sticks. 35 years of publishing, and Kit keeps getting better. I could say the same of Michael Gizzi, who died too soon, writing his very best work.