

Materials Matter

If literary history depends on anything it is the book. The larger scale publishing industry is trapped in the same inflexibly structured cost-benefit scheme as the oil companies—now that we’ve sold everyone the gascar, we cannot expect them to want to drive anything else. Only the previously best-selling can be marketed. On paranoid days I think, “Is there someone actually strategizing somewhere in some tall building ‘If we give them only one style of writing, it’s sure to be a best-seller! The lifeblood of the aesthetic gets executed, and the consumer is trained not to think of this. Small Press Litmus test says.... The big-money publishing industry is winning at making cash, but failing poetically. Not bothered about beauty or breath. Pinsky as Hummer. More cookbooks than novels.

Small press publishing is the only way anything not publishable in the “major” wing of publishing will ever be put into print. My job, as I define it, is to make it something someone else might want to *touch* and *feel*—maybe even nibble its lobes. I believe some of the books I’ve published are truly important. Josh Schuster’s *Project Experience* and Mike Magee’s *Morning Constitutional* are important, thoughtful and beautifully written books that mix genre, steal from the archives, and return something to the archive again. I have been lucky enough to affiliate myself with a couple of universities where getting funding for chapbooks was part of the deal, and Gil Ott of Singing Horse Press set me up with Laura Moriarty of Small Press Distribution. For their work I am so grateful. Until this past year, I had not concerned myself with press money often. Now, however, I have three great books in queue and I must stop to fund raise.

Chapbooks run along a continuum from pamphlet to artist book. The aesthetic of the artist book often requires intensive labor, if not a decent amount of cash. The aesthetic of the pamphlet reflects the very conditions of experimental poetry publishing—desperate. My desire leans more toward the aesthetic of the artist book, though often in actuality my desire is to get the maximum amount of work I feel I can do justice to—maximum book-beauty for least cost and quickest output. There is more work being written than the available page space for making contact.

From the beginning handwritten press has largely operated as a gift economy. First, because we can always only afford to make 100, we want to get the books to people we think will appreciate them. In this way, an editor can act as a conduit between readers, communities, and other presses. Whoever is involved in collaborating on a book’s production contributes to trying to get them to the best readers we know of. Yet the question always nags: what about great readers we don’t know? what about future readers? Second, larger bookstores and distributors regularly throw away and-or destroy what doesn’t sell by a certain period of time. If you send your books to libraries, both personal and poetry-centered ones, they will be preserved and freely distributed for as long as they can hold up. This model invites subversion by resisting shopping at multinational corporate bookstores. It also oddly inverts the usual sales model in that the maker chooses the “buyer” (reader) rather than the other way around.

I’ve noticed there are fewer and fewer presses these days. I haven’t put out any books in a few years. I have two manuscripts in queue and the design all figured out—one thing, I don’t have the money, haven’t had it for awhile now. You see, I am one of the increasing numbers of adjunct labor currently buttressing the academic humanities.

Every semester presents a new set of variables—you don't know what school you will teach for, nor what courses you will teach and often get cancelled or switched at the last minute. The exhaustion of learning a new school system every semester, coupled with the low pay and lack of medical benefits, makes it very hard to pull together even a spare \$100.

I always wanted to make books that were poetic experiences, books whose form becomes a synecdoche of the poetics inside—"a ball of light in the hand"—I took the Medieval idea of the book quite seriously. Book art seemed the ultimate and best means of materializing a piece of writing. For this reason, I have had a hard time with the possibility for expenditure never exceeding \$100—the materials I need sometimes add up to more than that, and in art, materials matter. Though I wouldn't call handwritten press book art; instead, think of it as trying to bring book art to the immediacy of the pamphlet.

In 1998, Nicole Markotic's *disOrientation* chapbooks brought my attention to the function of the book as literary historical environment. Shortly thereafter I met Gil Ott of Singing Horse Press, whose *Paper Air* was a beautiful yet cheap-ish magazine, and whose photograph of meat in Harryette Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T* showed me how involved a publisher can become. If literary history is to be written it must create a textual environment in which poetry thrives. Poetry's activation of the imagination makes its vital connection with the reader through the medium in which it is presented—not only language, but paper or computer or performance. For me, a poetry chapbook has to be a performance of the work inside. I like to think of each book as evolving from the weather of the words inside.

Chapbooks are the aesthetic backbone of small press poetry and as such in the era of the anti-art, anti-intellectual, American "free trade" corporate welfare state—we have little or no money to operate. Because this country doesn't want to systematically support detail work, time to reflect, or the care and feeding of intellection, this country systematically does not support artists—especially "fringe" artists (smallest profit margin). So one must find a benefactor. What happens to artists who must rely on The Nobility? If only I could appoint myself Rector of the Department of Appointments.