

Factory School and Small Press Publishing

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On the one hand, publishing has never been easier. Anyone can print a book who has enough money to pay a Print-on-Demand publisher, such as those on the Internet. This realizes in the electronic realm what has not always been the case: anyone with a modest sum of money can publish a book. Still, the question remains as to how more immanent and cost-effective publishing options affect the growth of small, independent publishers and what this growth means to today's publishing markets, reading communities, and educational institutions.

Many cultural conservatives—some who are otherwise liberal in their thinking—decry that there are “too many books,” by which they mean, “too many to judge.” From our point of view, the opportunities and realities of POD publishing suggest a decentering of critical authority, a comment on the instability of (or deliberate destabilizing of) canonicity in the age of the privatization of the public sphere. However, controlling the means of production is one thing; creating new channels of distribution, and making better use of old ones, is another.

Models are many and various for the kinds of in-house, local production and distribution activities that now operate under the radar of corporate publishing in the U.S. Small press poetry publishing is just one example. Seemingly expressions of purposelessness, poetry publishing has often operated with the most fervency and purpose. Small presses prosper, or at least “survive,” even when their print runs are limited to the low 100s. Like in the time of early offset or xerox, there is a dispersal of editorial agency, a spirit of collective do-it-yourselfism. In fact, recourse to the multiple and multiplying resources of collectivism is perhaps the single greatest contribution of small press publishing to the history and culture of literary activity in recent years.

Owing partly to the large title base of the combined PaperBrain Press and Meow Press, which between them published more than 100 chapbooks of poetry and related language art dating back to the 1980s, Factory School began in 2000 with a shared dedication to editorial collaboration, collective resource sharing, and grassroots organizing. In 2006 Factory School plans to increase its production and distribution network through both viral and traditional marketing strategies. At the same time, we are hoping to develop an organizational structure that will allow for and appreciate editorial autonomy while developing an institutional structure that will multiply the labors of the collective.

One approach we take, and one specific to book production and distribution, is to imagine and realize the book “series” as a structural frame for single-author works and single editions. The ‘Heretical Texts’ series, for example, began with the assumption that poetry books make best sense—or at least a different kind of sense—in the context of other poetry books. Perhaps the future-life of print poetry in the U.S., the poetry book series extends the life of individual titles that otherwise (given the limitations of small press print-runs) might lapse in the solo-space of individual authorship and self-

promotion. Book series production and distribution may also be the most practical option for classroom use, where a series theme or focus maps onto, or is deliberately designed for, a particular curriculum or learning module. This approach is central as well to our developing textbook project.

More generally, we see book making and distribution as an art of design realized not only in the production of discrete artifacts (perfect-bound books) but also in the instrumental development of books and book culture in ways relevant to larger values of accessible education, community collaboration, and resource sharing. Si Transken, discussing collective self-publishing, describes book making as a two-way design “performance.” In making books together, she writes, “[w]e design the books and they redesign us.”¹ Performing design, and designing the performance, are the dual imperatives underlying the publishing efforts of Factory School. In collectivizing that effort, we continue to seek collaborators with similar commitments.

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¹ See “Creativity, Cultural Studies, and Potentially Fun Ways to Design and Produce Autobiographical Material from Subalterns’ Locations.”