

Ugly Duckling Presse

Anna Moschovakis

Dear Jane,

I'm not sure how much of the topic I can address in a limited space, but I'll try. And bear in mind that I'm just one voice among many.

At some point in our development as a nonprofit, maybe at a point when we were trying to kick up our fundraising efforts, we assigned every member of Ugly Duckling Presse an official email address: you know, `yourname@uglyducklingpresse.org`. Once the novelty wore off, I realized that for most UDP correspondence it was easier just to use my personal email account—I could get things done faster, and since I wasn't being paid for my work with the Presse, I thought I shouldn't waste any minutes logging in and out of accounts. So I had the address forwarded and mostly forgot about it. But I found myself taking the extra time to use the "official" address for certain correspondence—writing a query letter about grant funding to a Foundation president, for example, or answering a request for professional letterpress services. Why did I feel my personal address was appropriate for correspondence with just about everyone who is part of the small-press-centric poetry community (writers, translators, reading series coordinators) but somehow inappropriate for institutional or capitalistic correspondence? One word: protocol. Whatever you want to call it—DIY, collective, underground, amateur, independent—the kind of publishing we do is not just about cutting corners but about skipping them altogether. When the shortest distance between two points takes you into uncharted territory, you don't really notice it if you never bought the map. Ever wonder why, when you get emails from friends who work for big corporations, the disclaimer at the bottom of the email is usually longer than the email itself? It's the same reason that as soon as you say "wedding," the cake or the dress or the hotel room costs three times as much. It's why, when you are assistant to a corporate V.P., your boss doesn't want to know that you can get her a plane ticket to London cheaper and faster than the company travel agent. Protocol.

As Ugly Duckling Presse, we have published about a dozen perfect-bound titles with the same printer/bindery. But we are still assigned to the representative for "self- and first-time publishers." Why? Because our 750-1500-copy runs don't qualify us for the Major Leagues? Never mind that the big houses often sell fewer than 1000 copies of their poetry and non-commercial fiction titles—even after raves in the NY Times and other mainstream publications. This isn't only about numbers. It's about protocol. Our printers know that UDP isn't a subsidiary of anybody else and that we aren't organized like a "normal" publishing house: there is no editor in chief, no production manager, no printer's rep (I don't even know what the proper job titles are for some of these positions). And the fact that a different person is likely to head up each project means that our expertise and habits are inconsistent: can you say "unprofessional"?

I think people tend to gravitate toward the communities they feel comfortable in or the communities they admire. There are a lot of problems with a community-based publishing model—nepotism is a word that I threw around a lot before I found myself on the inside of the poetry family, and it disturbs me that usually I can hardly remember why—but the problems seem to be exacerbated when independent publishing emulates, even partially, the establishment (by which I suppose I mean profit-driven or partially profit-driven publishing). Contests presided over by expert judges are problematic in our world because we don't want an alternative aristocracy—what we seem to want is an alternative to the aristocratic structure of mainstream publishing, in which full-time unpaid internships are almost a prerequisite to garnering a choice editorial job. You can be an intern at UDP for a couple hours a month and we'll still write you a recommendation (though maybe nobody will read it).

I love that UDP puts out all kinds of stuff on all kinds of paper with all kinds of bindings, and I love that we have nearly 100 subscribers who are willing to help fund the production of a season's worth of books that in many cases haven't even been chosen yet. I am astounded by the number of people willing to donate labor and talent to UDP and to all the presses and journals I've become familiar with in the past several years. I don't know that any of us is inventing, subverting, or challenging much, or if we are, how much that matters to people outside our circle; the protocolics still attend their daily meetings, and I don't think we're on the agenda. But that's okay. To quote my favorite amateur band from Los Angeles, "We're having much more fun." I'll send this from my personal email.

Yours, Anna

Anna Moschovakis works with Ugly Duckling Presse, a Brooklyn-based publishing collective.