

A Discretion of Form: seriality and connectivity in chapbook culture

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I want to frame the culture of the chapbook around an analogue of seriality, and remark this as constituted by the same issues of continuity and disruption that make any serial project textured and interesting. Let me be clear from the outset that what I mean by seriality is not a numbered and logical progression by which a story or argument develops along a linear trajectory. Instead, I am interested in a literary tradition that examines the serial as representative of a different mode of movement. What Ernest Fenollosa said about the structure of the sentence, I'd like to extrapolate toward a wider sense of literary activity: And though we may string never so many clauses or pass into a single compound sentence, *motion leaks everywhere*, like electricity from an exposed wire.

While it is clear that the limited frame of a chapbook imparts on its contents a sense of interrelatedness, chapbooks have particular efficacy in pointing beyond their discrete boundaries to a sense of seriality, of ongoing creative developments between books, whether they be intentionally part of a series under the editorial shaping of one press or part of a continuing communal discussions between presses and poets.

I take as a starting point Jack Spicer's insistence in *The Admonitions* that: Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone. Immediately this statement calls our attention to processes of consequence, which I willfully interpret as having to do with both import and sequence. It also underlines that processes of reading are processes of assessment, of judging, but that such assessment must be done within the sequence, the series of relations that are brought to bear on the individual product. (Note that Fenollosa gets at something similar when he is talking about Chinese ideograms, observing that signs “become far more striking and poetic when we pass from such simple original pictures to compounds. In this process of compounding, two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them.” I would also say that the “magic” that Spicer assumes as intrinsic to the process inheres in not individual relations between static poems, or single chapbooks, etc. but the relations that emerge from parataxis, if not interrelatedness itself—what Kenner, in *The Pound Era*, refers to as the pattern of self-interfering energies.

Let me reassert that what I mean by seriality here is not a linear process but the meandering processes of reading, of “fitting things together” that yield serendipitous turns and results. I should acknowledge myself as someone who came of age in an avowedly “experimental” community, and so I understand chapbook culture as largely intended to address and investigate what has been excluded from more mainstream publishing. That is, these publications address

absences in commercial publishing, but also foster, even suggest, what Richard Deming of Phylum Press calls “elective affinities among poets” and poems. So while there are clearly many chapbook publishers and authors who are writing work that could well be published in conventional venues, I am explicitly interested in work that could model motion leaking everywhere. For both philosophical and concrete reasons, chapbooks can attain Gertrude Stein’s aims for (meta-)narration; while such products can carry forward a relation to their internal and external connections, they are usefully achronological, not indebted to a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, as Stein says, there is a difference between succession—one thing following another—and continuing. That ongoing movement of continuing, leads after a fashion, to modes of continuity and this is where the chapbook, despite its modest size and role in the literary world, excels. To concretize: a poem meets a poem in a chapbook and develops an intimacy with it. A series of poems come into an intimate and non-static series of relations and those relations can be made to extend beyond the chapbook to the admittedly limited distribution network of the publisher. Crucial here is that the entire process, as it extends from itself, is bounded by limitation: few readers will, by the very nature of the enterprise, ever see any one chapbook. No one chapbook can claim to give a comprehensive view of the author’s work. Thus chapbooks and chapbook culture function much as ellipses do in the world of punctuation: they mark the stance of the statement they accompany and also gesture toward its incompleteness.

I’ll turn now to considering the actual construction of the chapbook and how it can promote this seriality. Here I rely mostly on insights from Scottish poet Thomas A. Clark who publishes Cairn Editions. Very often Clark’s materials are extremely simple—8.5 x 11 paper that is printed and folded, yet the chapbooks are ingeniously made; their very simplicity beguiles the reader. Among my favorites, for instance, is a folded card of dark blue paper, the front cover of which says “a dwelling in twilight.” The reader opens the card to find: nothing. The interior of the card is blank; the reader is placed physically in the blue twilight of the paper’s fold. This poem could not work without the physical interaction of the reader opening the card and directing her gaze onto the blank paper. There is a form of intimacy here, and a connectedness (a continuing movement) between the author’s thought, the design of this diminutive chapbook, and the activity of the reader. The contingencies of each element are foregrounded in a way that could not occur within the standard book format. Clark critiques the typical book as a construction that it permits the reader to operate comfortably within assumptions about what constitutes reading. He complains:

The way most poets treat the book is as a mere receptacle, a kind of box. The intention is to cram as much in as they can. Typically, poets write a number of separate poems, then when they have enough send them off to a publisher, who brings the book out in a house style... the poet usually doesn’t have much more to do with it. ... this is to miss out on a lot of the possibilities for poetry. ... Generally speaking, poets haven’t yet caught up with what Mallarme was doing... they don’t appreciate the book as imaginative space.

Here, the problem of a book or chapbook as contained, as seeking to be circumscribed by its own boundaries, is foregrounded. While it might be argued that chapbooks, which are often carefully made and beautiful objects, highlight poetry as a commodity, I would argue that it's the typical book that more forcefully strait-jackets poetry into a commoditized shape because, as Clark notes, it crams in as much as it can. The more allusive gesture of a series of poems grouped in a text can be blunted by the desire to make a "real" book, a legitimating product.

Clark, in emphasizing the construction, the actual making of the poem as simultaneous with the making of the chapbook implicates the reader as a co-creator who must physically interact with the chapbook in order for its intention or meaning to be fulfilled. Cairn Editions' work is devoted to the project of making a shared imaginative and physical space within the chapbook. (Similarly, I note Jane Sprague's observation of her work with Palm Press, "when the press works at its best, the book object functions as a mirror to the work inside.") Since Clark often works in miniaturized formats, one manner by which he creates physical and imaginative space is to pace the text in very small increments page by page:

Of course, a small book can be a series of poems, but one device I've used continually is to have one poem spread throughout a small book, with one stanza or one image to a page. ...The turning of pages then gives the rhythm of the poem. It gives more freedom to the reader too, allowing the reader to decide when to turn the page. ...When you turn the page, then there is a new thing. ...The turning of pages becomes expectation, delay, revelation.

This description of movement through a poem bears some resemblance to Jack Spicer's description of the serial poem. Spicer insists that seriality entails the poet's willingness to follow the poem, without having a predetermined plan: It simply means you go from one point to another to another to another, not really knowing where you are from point A to point B.

The object then is to be involved in some degree of suspension, and to experience limited degrees of illumination along the way. I quote Spicer's now well-known citation of Robin Blaser's definition of the serial poem:

It's as if you go into a room, a dark room. A light is turned on for a minute. Then it's turned off again and you go into a different room where a light is turned on and turned off.

The space of the chapbook is akin to the serial experience that Spicer is after. Peter Gizzi's summary of Spicer's approach could apply equally to Clark's: serial composition is the practice of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure for them. The difference, of course, is that Spicer was thinking mostly of straight text whereas Clark understands that the

movement through the poem can be movement through a mental as well as physical space, and that the material experience of the poem can enhance, not detract from the indeterminacy inherent in exploring a new space.

Turning outward from this, one can see corresponding patterns within a series of chapbooks. It might appear that the editorial orchestration of a chapbook series would immediately delimit the kind of conversation and connectivity possible among various publications. As Jane Sprague says about her Palm Press, “It’s a choice to publish chapbooks—a way of making many kinds of alliances very obvious and tangible,” and she sees this work as a cultural imperative. This does not mean however, that the conversation among a series of chapbooks need become dogmatic or narrow, only that the editorial proclivities of the editor can enhance community by carving out a general channel for the work to flow through. The writing itself becomes usefully intractable in terms of its unexpected branchings and its serendipitous affinities with other published works. Many people here will likely be familiar with the work of Burning Deck and Tuumba Presses and the way their chapbooks had a catalyzing effect on work and activity among the nascent Language poetry scene. At the same time, the work published by these presses was hardly uniform in its formal strategies and attitudes. Those projects, and those of other presses like Potes and Poets and Chax Press, each of which has proceeded in varying ways, has significantly shaped an ongoing conversation about what poetry is, until that conversation has permeated larger and larger forums and many of the original chapbook authors are now published by (what I consider big and legitimacy-conferring) presses. I am quite aware, however, that this result was unanticipated by these presses.

Similarly, I have heard Charles Alexander of Chax Press and Peter Gannick of Potes and Poets state that part of their aim was to bring underrepresented work into a public conversation. Alexander stated this summer in an interview at Naropa that he feels less necessity now to print some of his better known poets, but has recently brought out a new book by the older poet Beverly Dahlen, whose on going project “A Reading” has been sadly neglected, as well as new work by younger, less established poets. In this way, the presses themselves are not static but depart from their original premises in new ways, revitalizing (talking back at) the process of making poetry and creating a means by which poetry is a conduit between author, reader, and community.

I want to include comments about my own process with EtherDome Press and how I feel it’s succeeded by the limited terms that I and my co-editor, Colleen Lookingbill, wanted it to work. EtherDome’s specific aim is to publish poets who have not had a chapbook or a book published before. Specifically, we were sensitive to the fact that for mysterious reasons, women continue to be less assertive about getting their work out than men are. (In the five years that we have been printing the chapbooks, it is only in the past year that we have received unsolicited manuscripts from women.) So EtherDome publishes only women and is meant to redress the problem we perceive by making an easy site of entry for women into a poetic community. Happily, though sometimes awkwardly, Colleen

and I have been known to disagree on what work is worthy of publication. Our strategy has been to permit each other complete editorial freedom and the outcome is that we don't have a particularly 'coherent' editorial focus. Why is this a good thing? Firstly, it keeps the process interesting and enlightening for Colleen and I. Secondly, it means that each year, we are distributing very different kinds of work to potential reviewers and readers. Different poets will suggest we send review copies to wildly differing periodicals, and we send them out in pairs, a chapbook sometimes arriving at the doorstep of a magazine with whom the author is completely unfamiliar. The result is that we are augmenting and forging connections between very different kinds of readers. Importantly, we are introducing new voices into the public discourse on poetry. Thus, the lines of communication from writer to reader, from one poet to another are highly irregular and I feel that the satisfaction and value of the project, modest as it is, is based on exactly this piecemeal seriality or expansiveness

The chapbook can function as a very elastic model of seriality, both in terms of its integrity as a material and literary object and in terms of its function within a community of literary energy. The simplicity of the format makes it more readily accessible as a strategic tool for poetry and community formation. Jane Sprague's story about learning to make chapbooks illustrates this so beautifully that I will close with her comments:

Joel Kuszai (Meow Press; Factory School) taught me how to make chapbooks. He showed me by making a model a few years ago on one piece of lined notebook paper in a coffeehouse. I share that story... because this is the kind of connectivity, social scope that I think chapbooks can hold—which is to say that the choice to publish chapbooks at all means each book actually 'holds' more than the book object itself—It also holds the history of whomever and whatever compelled the publisher to embrace this model anyway.

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Among other things, **Elizabeth Robinson** is a poet and co-publisher with Colleen Lookingbill of EtherDome Chapbook Series.