

Forum on Small Press Publishing

Convened and edited by Jane Sprague

It came from an idea of access. How slim books by Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and Samuel Beckett found our small hands before we knew what we held. How similar factors of randomness and chance seemed to also mark our travels through institutions of higher education and our adaptive strategies of self education. How the randomness led us to Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, Kathy Acker and a little known play of hers called *Birth of the Poet*. How these same fractured meetings of randomness and chance opened up further, opened in a way that wanted to allow more in, always opening as some grand aperture but without the aperture's rules of metal or tissue, without specific sites where the aperture might break down.

This Introduction to what follows is not intended as an allegorical aperture. It is intended as a gesture toward full disclosure or a gesture away from frustration, frustrations too obvious or easily summed up or dismissed as complaint, begrudging, bemoaning. A gesture away from pie charts of gross economics. Though the aperture and what funnels through it is capable of expansion in order to contain all of that. But more to the point, more to the way of writing something befitting a proper Introduction, it came from our inability to locate books without purchasing an advanced degree. We tried. Try as we might, we tried to force a kind of access, to tease wider openings from what we found, stumbling around in the world, working odd jobs, stumbling around in our reading. But something in us was stilted, stultified. Malcontent. Isolated. This then might be the exact frame of reference from which to begin.

We could not find the books that helped us understand our writing. We could not find, in popular culture marketplaces or dimly lit used bookstores, a kind of compass, a kind of something to recognize. Something to recognize and move on from. And so, we would invent.

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What follows is a gathering of responses from several questions posted to the How2 website and sent to individuals whom we hoped might contribute their thoughts, answers and their own questions about small press publishing for the purpose of creating a true public Forum in the spirit of Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman's Call for Work for their forthcoming pamphlet series *Chain Links*:

Think of these books as a conference panel for the page, a panel that is being held at an unusually interdisciplinary conference of leftists, environmentalists, inventors, freethinkers.

Think of this Forum as a kind of virtual panel, one which might be added to over time. Think of this Forum as a variation on the idea of aperture, a Forum which might continually expand, open and allow more in. Allow more fractured ruptures for other spaces of thinking to expand. Other ways of publishing to expand. Or as Elizabeth Robinson writes later on in this assemblage: *motion leaking everywhere*.

We had especially hoped to include information and reports from people not geographically located inside the United States. We are working on that. Please check back in the future to see what we may hear about small press publishing in Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, Viet Nam, parts of Europe, Mexico, and a variety of Elsewheres.

We realize that some of what we say is not necessarily ‘new,’ we realize that what we say is indebted to the writing and thinking of many other people too numerous to list in the space of our Introduction. Steve Evans’ work in articles published in *The Poker* as well as on his website, Third Factory <http://www.thirdfactory.net>; the book *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*; E. Tracy Grinnell’s “die bene Aufgabe: An Editor’s Note” from the journal *Aufgabe* [2]; the writings of Cornel West (“The New Cultural Politics of Difference”) and Kristin Prevallet’s citation of West at the “Women in the Avant-Garde” conference in addition to Kaia Sand’s statement at that event has been extremely helpful to our thinking:

I chose the term "avant garde" over "experimental" because "avant-garde" implies the social side of the work. There are a lot of ways to pitch in with an avant-garde movement—this is an inclusive frame. So many artists have shown us that if you want to extend what's possible, you need to build the ground to walk on—and that's collective action. Such ground is established by chapbooks, readings, meetings ... If, on the other hand, one strives to be an author who works individually and is lauded and published by HarperCollins, one is striving, generally speaking, to gain acceptance from social elites who uphold established conventions. One simply succumbs.

Lyn Hejinian’s writing and thinking has also been especially important to us as we solicited and gathered responses to our questions:

I had come to realize that poetry exists not in isolation (alone on its lonely page) but in transit, as experience, in the social worlds of people. For poetry to exist, it has to be given meaning, and for meaning to develop there must be communities of people thinking about it. Publishing books as I did was a way of contributing to such a community—even a way of helping to invent it. Invention is essential to every aspect of a life of writing.

In our more official moments of writing we said: Subaltern models of small press publishing present unique and exciting modes of representation—modes of representation that are under specific pressures and often in flux. This Forum on small press publishing

attempts to explore the work of individuals and communities of poets who are publishing books and inventing the ways in which writing is re/produced.

In the United States, books of poetry as products of a growing and increasingly entrenched fee-based contest system conform to and produce texts which adhere to many levels of capitalist and market-driven constraints. While posed as strategies for competition among the most excellent, what the contest system tends to produce are texts which publishers can bank on to sell and disregard the fact that access to such "contests" is therefore necessarily limited to that section of economic class which can afford to enter them. The contest model also exists as a growingly pervasive strategy publishers adopt to subsidize the cost of printing and advertising their final product: *The Book*. Less often made evident are the aesthetic and political concessions implicit to entering into this model as writers and readers of contemporary poetry. This forum on small press publishing attempts to examine what other models we have to offer, imagine, and devise as we (as writer/reader/editors) complicate and potentially mediate existing models for the publication and distribution of innovative writing.

As E. Tracy Grinnell has written:

Small press publishing in all its formats 'is the creation...of those poets who have seized or often have invented their own means of production and distribution...something we've demanded as a value that must remain first and foremost under each poet's own control,' where the control exercised is not one over meaning, but an insistence on the movement between writer-reader-editor that defends the right to make meaning. So the risk becomes not a personal one but the risk of concession. Writing from where many of us do, an increasingly large margin, it is imperative that the means of production and distribution remain in our hands, that we continue to use whatever means available to present writing that is the product of thinking, disentangling, and resisting. The task at hand is not to stop.

(Emphasis in original; quotation marks cite Jerome Rothenberg's "Pre-Face" from the book *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*.)

In an effort to expand our examination of small press publishing globally (several reports from other parts of the globe may be forthcoming and added to this Forum over time), we invite you to read our questions and responses while considering what other ideas this Forum might open up in your thinking. Please also see Susan Schultz's *Pacific Poetries* [LINK] feature and the interview with her [LINK] included in this issue of How2 for more discussion of small press publishing.

These are the questions we asked people to consider:

From forming editorial collectives to self-publishing, as poet-publishers and reader-writers, what models do we have to offer, imagine, devise (or how might existing publishing and distribution models potentially be mediated) as we endeavor to build

innovative publishing models that defend and invent the conditions under and within which our writing exists, is produced and distributed?

Small press publishing of innovative poetries provides a distinct subaltern model to existing modes of literary production and their means of distribution. How might an editorial poetics of publishing that includes (or exists exclusively *as*) gift economy alter, challenge and create economic and aesthetic resistance or subversion?

Independent publishers, specifically those committed to avant-garde writing and its strategies, engage modes of representation that often are under specific pressures. What happens when presses commit to publishing chapbooks, either exclusively or in part? Where do chapbooks fall within this rubric of small press publishing, particularly as few bookstores or distributors are willing to carry them?

Many independent publishers are committed to an editorial practice that challenges competition and the contest system now common to many university, non- and not-for-profit presses, especially in the United States. In what ways might contest-driven / competition models blunt critical inquiry or limit the possibilities of poetry itself? Communities tend to coalesce for a variety of reasons; how might we describe the communities that editors, publishers, distributors, poets and readers of independent presses are in the process of participating in &/or inventing?

What follows is an assemblage of responses from poet/publishers/editors/readers.

We hope to expand and add to this discussion over time. In the interest of expanding this aperture, after reading and considering the ideas brought forth and complicated in this Forum please consider writing sending your response to Jane Sprague at **janesprague[at]gmail[dot]com**

— Jane Sprague