VOL 5 NO 1
JOURNAL OF THE COLLEGE
BOOK ART ASSOCIATION

# Openings

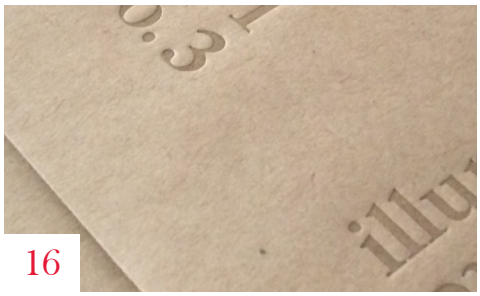
STUDIES IN BOOK ART

# *Contents*

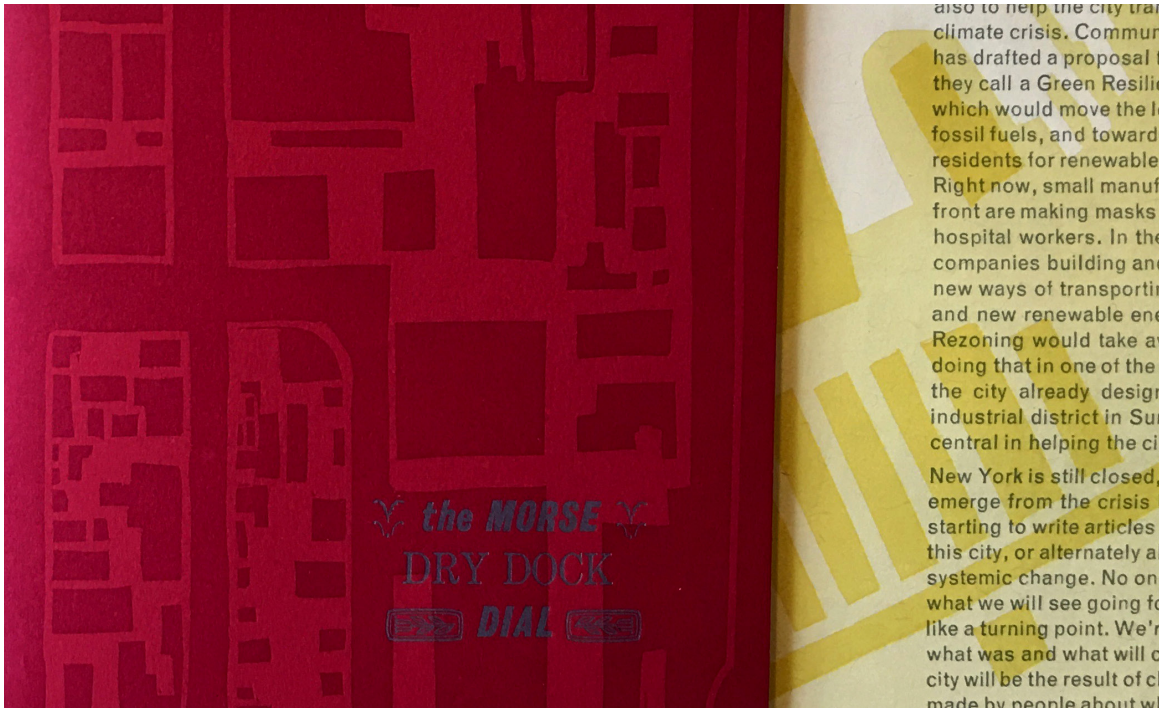













*Detail from* The Morse Dry Dock Dial, Brain Washing from Phone Towers, *Sarah Nicholls.* *(See page xx.)*

## FROM THE EDITOR

*by Peter J. Tanner*

### ABOUT THE EDITOR

*Peter J. Tanner, PhD, is Associate Instructor, World Languages and Culture, at the University of Utah. He, Him, His, Él, Ele.*

**WHILE RECENTLY UNBOXING AND ORGANIZING** my book collection after moving into a new house I came upon a favorite book, Hannah Arendt's edited edition of Walter Benjamin's essays titled *Illuminations*. Naturally, when finding one of my favorite books, I had to leaf through it, looking at the titles and all the underlining and notes that I had made. I could not help but notice the parallel between my situation and the title of Benjamin's short 1931 article, "Unpacking My Library."[1] Upon rereading it I rediscovered, ruminated upon, and recontextualized several passages that I believe are relevant to artist books and their creators. Amid Benjamin's reflections upon his unpacking his own library, he proposes,

> Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method. At this point many of you will remember with pleasure the large library which Jean Paul's poor little schoolmaster Wutz gradually acquired

Openings: STUDIES IN BOOK ART

EDITOR
Peter J. Tanner

GENRE EDITORS
Peter J. Tanner, *Academic and Critical Theory*
Levi Sherman, *Book Reviews*
Bobby Lee, *Student Perspectives*
Sara R. Rieger, *Studio Praxis*

EDITORIAL BOARD
AB Gorham, *Chair, Publications Committee*
Jeff Groves
Kyle Holland
Katherine M. Ruffin
Emily P. Tipps

Matt Runkle, *Copy Editor*
Friskey Design, *Design*
Virginia Green, *Web Design*
Sara T. Sauers, *Layout*

ISSN 2326-0157

*Openings: Studies in Book Art* is a peer-reviewed journal of the College Book Art Association (CBAA). It publishes critical, historical, and theoretical articles, reviews, and interviews about book art and its pedagogy. *Openings* is published yearly online and is available as part of membership in the CBAA or through institutional subscription.

If you are interested in submitting an article or review to the journal, please visit journals.sfu.ca/cbaa or email journal@collegebookart.org.

> by writing, himself, all the works whose titles interested him in bookfair catalogues; after all, he could not afford to buy them. Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like.[2]

Book artists, past and present, have been and are engaged in "the most praiseworthy method," even above that of "writing [a book] oneself." They move beyond this by creating not only works that engage with text, but also by creating visually complex and haptically engaging work of a hybrid nature that questions the formation and accumulation of knowledge and the metanarratives that undergird systems. Book artists must create the works that interest them, and by association, us, because we are dissatisfied with existing books that do not provide what we would like to see and read. What do we want? I propose that we are seeking a diverse array of voices, expressions, experiences, and perspectives that respect and include all people.

The task of creating all the books that are lacking in this world is a daunting one. Despite this difficulty, that is exactly what book artists already do. They question individual and collective experiences and relationships. This is not a task for the faint of heart in a world filled with turmoil and war, which render so many geopolitical relationships in flux. What once might have appeared stable, or merely accepted as such, cannot continue. Questions must be raised, authority challenged, rights demanded, and freedoms guaranteed. Privilege is actually a responsibility, the duty of which is to make the world better, on either a micro or macro scale.

As Benjamin continues unpacking his library, he comes across some photo albums, which prompt him to muse upon their value in the following remark:

> I put my hands on two volumes bound in faded boards which, strictly speaking, do not belong in a book case at all: two albums with stick-in pictures which my mother pasted in as a child and which I inherited. They are the seeds of a collection of children's books which is growing steadily even today, though no longer in my garden. There is no living library that does not harbor a number of booklike creations from fringe areas. They need not be stick-in albums or family albums, autograph books or portfolios containing pamphlets or religious tracts; some people become attached to leaflets and prospectuses, others to handwriting facsimiles or typewritten copies of unobtainable books; and certainly periodicals can form the prismatic fringes of a library.[3]

What struck me most about this observation is that the volumes that Benjamin thinks do not belong in his library bookcase, which are inherited and are included in every library, exist within what he calls the "fringe areas." These works represent our past in need of revision, but they can also prompt evaluation and examination of which books we generally think "should" be in a library.

These persistent memories are the defining moments that are used to provide the narratives and metanarratives of our present. They come from the fringes of the libraries, and they are the books that represent the unwritten knowledge that exists within and without archives on the bookshelves of the lived world. These local, personal, and often neglected

*Detail from* Nine Lives, *Coriander Reisbord. (See page xx.)*

sources of knowledge must be reframed, understood, and heard. As Paula D. Royster points out,

> It may be theoretically accurate to believe words are "purely arbitrary … maintained by convention only" (Barry, 2009, p. 40) but in praxis, not so much for is it not our lived experiences that inform us? Words matter; words have always mattered. My lived experiences serve as a constant reminder of some truths, most of which are inconvenient for some and irreconcilable for others.
>
> There is no one, singular event that brought me to where I am. I suppose I could trace my interests in the tension of socialized racism back to my love of history and the books that did not love me back. Trying to contextualize the authors' interpretations of my ancestors without a counternarrative was glaring even for an uninformed third-grader whose greatest social challenge was getting to the swing set first during recess.[4]

I would modify her statement to say that *books* are not arbitrary, that *books* inform our praxis. Books matter. Books, and all historical and present forms of portable knowledge, have always mattered because they contain information necessary for us to address questions that surround us, despite their being inconvenient and at times irreconcilable. When books do not love us back, or require contextualized interpretations, the omissions within canons are glaring. Benjamin suggests that book-like creations can illuminate the fringe areas that represent our lived experiences, can produce those titles that provide the counternarratives that are so lacking in the ontological now.

When narratives meet each other and overlap in books and knowledge formation, the gaze and understanding of disparate individuals intimately cross paths. Derrida describes it in the following way:

> When my gaze meets yours, I see both your gaze and your eyes, love in fascination—and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are visible (things or objects in the world) as much as seeing (at the origin of the world), I could precisely touch them, with my finger, lips, or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you—if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared.[5]

If we dare, we can approach the fringes of the library of human experience and produce the counternarratives that provide a deeper vision of experiences, objects, and people, thereby illuminating the whole. ■

## NOTES

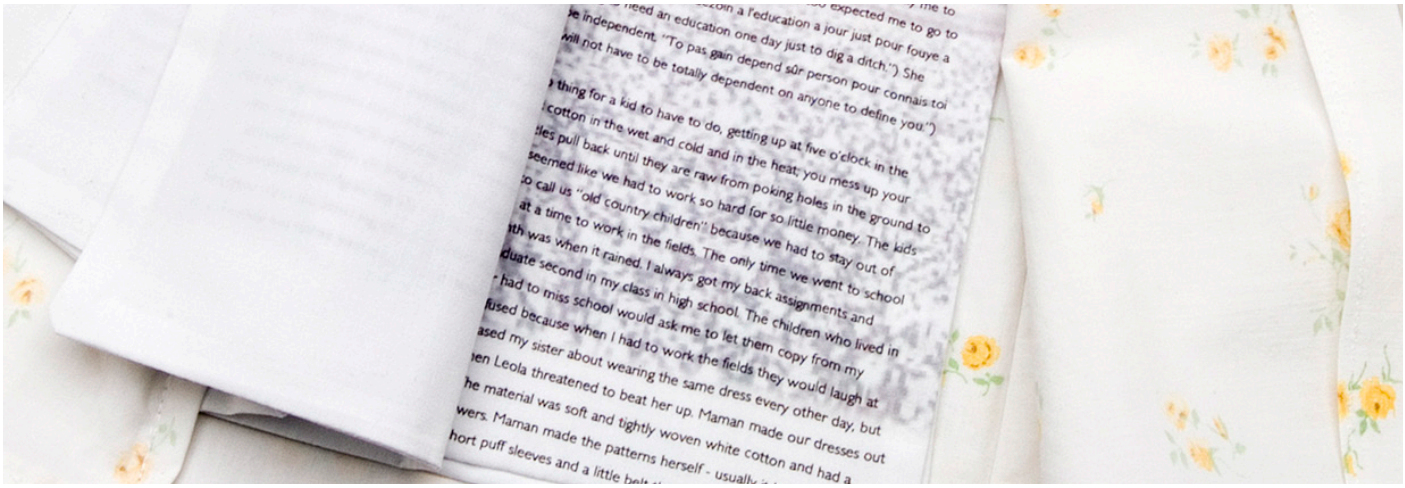
1. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1985), 59–67.

2. Ibid., 61.

3. Ibid., 66.

4. Paula D. Royster. *Decolonizing Arts-Based Methodologies* (Boston: Brill, 2020), ix.

5. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3, quoted in Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortés-Rocca, "Notes on Love and Photography," *October*, no. 116 (2006): 3.



*Detail from Figure 14:* Island Girl

# READING ROOTS

*Who are you without a home? Do you believe that memories are enough to give you comfort? Thoughts alone are enough to bring back what you left behind? Dreams are enough to teach you the art of speech? . . . Who are you in this world of riddles?*—Tunu: The Gift[1]

*by Alisa Banks*

THE FIRST GIFT I CAN REMEMBER was a large, thick picture book of Mother Goose nursery rhymes given to me by my aunt—a goodbye memento presented to me and my sisters as we left for our new home on another continent. I was four years old, mesmerized by the colorful images and words, which I understood as codes that could unlock the stories. No matter how many times I turned the pages and stared, or how fervently I wished, the code could not be broken. In our new place, my father would return home from work, sit cross-legged in "his" chair, unfold the newspaper, and become engrossed in reading the news of the day. Some evenings, if I turned around to face the opposite end of the room, I would observe my mother move the chairs away from the dining room table, spread several yards of cloth over it, unfold a paper booklet that contained words and drawings, pin the accompanying tissue paper that also had words and drawings onto the cloth, and cut out shapes. Later, she would sew the pieces together to create matching dresses for my two sisters and me, or shorts sets for my baby brother. Other days, my father unboxed a canvas printed with small shapes and numbers onto the table, along with small pots of oil paint, and filled in the shapes with color according to a guide that came in the box. My parents' actions cemented my belief that words printed on paper held the key to information not available to those who, like me, could not decipher them.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Alisa Banks is a visual artist based in Dallas, Texas, who investigates connections to contemporary culture, her Creole heritage, and the African diaspora through the lenses of home, terrain, and the body, using Southern Louisiana as a point of entry. Her sculptural artist books, mixed media work, and textile collages often incorporate fibers and found materials and reference traditional craft forms. Alisa's work has been exhibited internationally, and is housed in private and public collections, including the Smithsonian Institution, the US Library of Congress, and the British Library. www.alisabanks.com.*

A culture is preserved by marking paper. Those images and words represent beliefs, triumphs, sorrows, and rules of governance. This is how a people sees itself and how it wants others to see it. Paper, heavy with the marks of history, is assembled and sewn into books. The earliest books contain words originally spoken and speak of actions previously performed. The physical book is a vessel of information—a place to preserve a story, an idea, a belief. However, printed words were not the only forms of reading I witnessed at four years old (though they too contained clues to understanding). Many years later, I would recognize other actions as "reading." One can read the stars, such as in astronomy and astrology—skills developed by peoples on every continent and relied upon for navigation, weather prediction, crop planting, and spiritual observances. Faces and body postures can be read, skills that aid in diplomacy and help maintain safety and assess well-being. There are written, visual, spoken, and performed signs. Modes of dress can be coded. Numbers may be signifiers. A hairstyle can denote social or political affiliation.

I have a term for the process of engagement with a book through the exploration of memory, culture, and archive: "root reading." I aim to reconcile a practice (bookmaking) with a system of communication (writing) that was denied to my ancestors, who were enslaved and then forcibly relocated to this continent. In the midst of upheaval, it was they who carried the fragments of former homelands, sowed and sewed them, used them to communicate in new ways that also maintained connections to their root.

In this context, "root" refers specifically to the culture of one's ancestors, one's origin or base. One can be physically severed from root, or the culture of one's ancestors, but remnants of origin remain. "Root" also has other associations: the part of a plant that provides structure and nourishment, or the base of a strand of hair whose shape determines curl pattern. In these and many other instances, root has the same meaning: connector, nurturer, origin. Plants, cloth, and hair are carriers of culture by the way in which they are selected, used, and/or maintained.

Language systems, societal structures, village and family histories: the method by which they evolved and were maintained, including the practice of and the structure of dissemination, was dismantled during the period of enslavement. A young enslaved person may have only partially remembered an oral history traditionally delivered by an elder. Context and detail were often incomplete. The gaps were filled in by partial understanding and through mixing that resulted after contact with new cultures. How else does one communicate without the familiarity of family, home, and language, and what might this look like in the creation of a new culture? Information can be shared in a myriad of ways.

Books are meant to be studied, admired, and enjoyed. They are recognized as root, but in the beginning, there was the word. A people separated from their root and forbidden to document or maintain cultural practices will build a new culture, a culture that continues to evolve when other forms of expression—music, dress, food, language, stitching—acquire increased significance as alternate forms of reading. These forms of expression, or cultural cues, are created and maintained in secret, though at times are hidden in plain sight. We rely on printed descriptions to carry history—descriptions of music, dress, and ritual that attempt to provide context, to read and to be read into. To a person unfamiliar

with them, a certain series of marks, for example, might appear random or accidental. But for the initiated, there is an understanding of a sign or symbol often overlooked by others. A cosmogram, or drawing of a series of circles and crosses carved on a ceramic pot or into the wooden floor of a church, may appear as random doodling, but to the initiated it symbolizes universal order, origin, and destiny.[2,3] Symbols sewn onto cloth may denote social status or give direction. Newspaper pages that appear to have been applied to walls helter-skelter are in fact placed purposefully to distract spirits. A field song or clothes drying on a line can be coded and used to give direction or tell a story. Smoke, a particular shade of blue, a familiar taste in a new homeland: each speaks of history. Each can be read.

Voice, action, repetition. This is how our ancestors remembered stories, relayed information, and shared beliefs. The historical practice of formally creating and deciphering shapes written or carved was limited to the upper strata of societies and was largely not available or outright forbidden to the majority of men and almost all women. The stories considered important, those considered worthy of speaking for a civilization, were those of the wealthiest citizens. The stories of the common folk, of women and other people living outside the mainstream, were not considered significant enough to preserve. For many, if not most, families who can trace their histories back to the earliest centuries of European colonization of North America, common literacy was only achieved fairly recently, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[4,5]

To clarify, the definition of literacy I am referring to is the ability to read, comprehend, and write in the official language of the land where one lives. This standard definition of literacy is problematic. What if one cannot read, write, and/or comprehend the "official" language or that spoken by the majority where they live, but can do so in another language? What if one can read symbols that are obscure or rare in the rest of the world, but commonly understood within one's culture? What of the centuries prior to European colonization, when indigenous peoples developed and practiced "other" ways of reading long before Western contact? And in cultures where women are the keepers of the stories, how are those stories documented if women are denied the ability to learn to read and write?

A book is a container, or vessel, for information. Over the millennia, the material of the vessel has varied: stone, clay, leaf, cloth, paper. I incorporate unconventional materials, those other than paper, to create books that engage the senses in order to forge connections between the reader and myself, between me and my history, and between the reader and the message. In addition to cultural practices, evidence of root may be physical, such as hair or skin. I use hair, for example, as a medium to speak to culture and connections. Messages are understood by those able to "read" the clues, even outside of specific personal experience. Black hair culture is multifaceted and dynamic. Through the years, hairstyles have been created and/or adopted to show political or social affiliation by movements and societies.[6] Some societies in precolonial Africa adopted hairstyle codes to denote marital status or social class. The afro hairstyle was adopted in the mid-twentieth-century US and beyond as a challenge to both oppression and Eurocentric beauty norms. I believe that featuring hair fibers in books invites the viewer to get "up close" to the subject and also plays on the attraction of hair as a creative and textural material.

*Figure 1:* Afro Centric

*Figure 2:* Edges

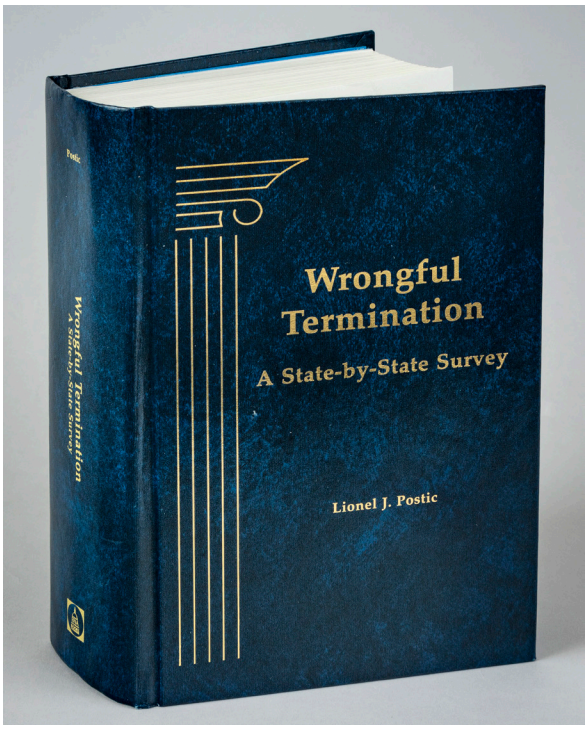
A book containing hair can be celebratory, as in *Afro Centric* (fig. 1), a circular Coptic book structure where hair is incorporated within and sewn across pages of handmade paper. The Coptic book structure, ancient and African, was sewn into a circle. The circular form is symbolic of the time required to care for Black hair and the distance in time from ancestors who employed many of the same hair-care techniques still in use: wrapping, coiling, braiding. Hairstyling is sartorial, and the shape of the book is reminiscent of a hat.

Hair can be used to enhance an elegiac message or help bring into focus the legal and personal magnitude of rejection. The *Edges* series (fig. 2) makes a political statement by recognizing contributions of marginalized communities. Each of the altered, Spanish-language books features hair attached onto and into the page in patterns based on braided hairstyles of African ancestry. The series was created in response to intolerance to immigration occurring at the southern borders of the US expressed on the national, state, and local level, and is a symbol of solidarity among marginalized cultures. *Edges* is an acknowledgement of not only the creativity, activity, and life that occur on and outside the margins of mainstream culture, but also of the effect marginalized communities have on mainstream culture.

*Wrongful Termination* (figs. 3 and 4) is an altered law book that addresses race-based discriminatory practices and subsequent lawsuits filed, and sometimes won, against employers, schools, and other agencies by people of color who were fired, passed over for promotion or hiring, or sent home

from school or work for styling their hair in ways that revealed its natural texture.[7] The book is read by unrolling the text from plastic hair curlers, an intimate act that invites the viewer to participate in the hair-care ritual. The text wound around the rollers is based on negative comments about natural hair found in newspaper editorials. The tightly rolled text forces the reader to slow down and to contemplate. Hair is attached to the bottom of the book cavity, away from the rollers, almost out of sight, protected and nearly out of reach. The placement alludes to the inappropriateness of the question, "Can I touch your hair?," posed by strangers and acquaintances of many who wear their Black hair in natural or cultural styles. The taboo of strangers touching hair can stem from the lack of agency of the enslaved over their bodies, the historical use of hair for spell casting in religious practices, and the unknown state of a stranger's "cleanliness."

Hair is a material used in ritualistic practices and connects us to our roots (ancestors). *Inheritance* (fig. 5) is a portable writing desk containing a book, an inkwell, a small quilt, and a brush made from human hair. Though we may not know them, we carry our ancestors in our hair. The theme of *Inheritance* is "hair day," a custom prevalent in




*Figures 3 (above) and 4:* Wrongful Termination


*Figure 5:* Inheritance


*Figure 6:* Cotton Heritage

many Black households in the US and throughout Africa and its diaspora, from ancient days to the present. More importantly, the book is about the continuation of oral histories, particularly those that are shared within the context of daily life.

Books containing hair, such as *Afro Centric*, *Edges*, *Wrongful Termination*, and *Inheritance*, offer an opportunity to expand thoughts about common practices. The materials facilitate the ability to understand something more meaningful in the ritual: to imagine the hair and the act of grooming it as a site of resistance against westernized beauty norms that insist that "other" equals something bad/unattractive/worth less/worthless.

My history is also intertwined with plants, in my present-day garden and in places before my time: previous farms, plantations, and gathering grounds. My near ancestral memory is rural. Many of my investigations center around a former farmstead, a place I consider my ancestral home, where my family settled over two centuries ago. It is in a Louisiana parish that was the site of a Tunica village during the time it was first colonized by the French in 1699. Nearby were lands occupied and tended by the Chickasaw, Ofogoula, Natchez, and Chitimacha, among other indigenous groups. Enslaved persons of African descent arrived in the early 1700s. During early colonization, the area was very unstable, with allegiances made and broken between the various tribes, the French, and the English. Wars and skirmishes were frequent. In this insecure climate, French colonists and enslaved and indigenous persons forged alliances, resulting in the formation of a new race, language, and culture. The place informs my work through the selection and use of materials (cloth, plants, soil) and techniques (stitching, knotting, tying) that are related in some way to rural farm life.

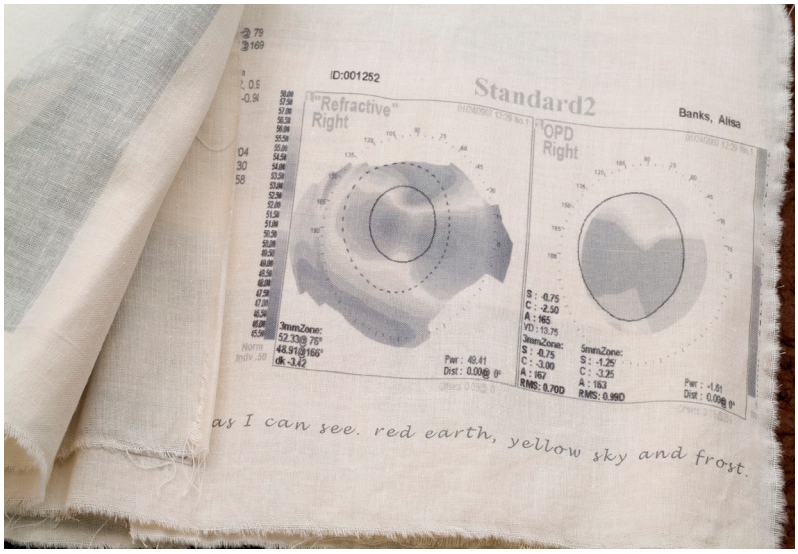
Paper and cloth share the same organic plant origin: cotton, which is used to make both. *Cotton Heritage* (fig. 6) features an essay on the cultural connection to "growing cotton." The text is printed on cotton rag paper, and the book contains both a cotton plant sculpture and plants from my garden sewn onto cloth pages. The growing, harvesting, processing, cooking, and sewing activities involved in making both paper and books correspond to the daily activities that took place on my ancestors' farm.

Additional connections are forged through engaging in these activities, particularly when those activities are place-based. To make *Ancestor Ink* (fig. 7), I gathered soil from the old farmstead, washed it, and made it into paint (fig. 8). Acorns and walnut hulls were boiled separately, and the liquid from each was added to the soil. Finally, I added a bit of indigo pigment. Each ingredient is significant to the place and links to roots. Indigo is symbolic as a former commodity that spurred the slave trade and as a connection to indigo cultivated in precolonial and present-day Africa.

*Elemental* is a series of cloth books centered on aspects of identity in relation to the elements: earth, fire, air, and water. Cloth was likely used more frequently than paper on the farmstead. By sewing plants into and onto paper and cloth, I am connecting them both to root, and at the same time, building a bridge to my ancestors. Cloth serves as a link that connects us to our pasts and informs our futures. As one whose history includes enslaved ancestors and whose great-grandmothers were not literate in the traditional sense, oral history, cloth, and ritual serve as both bridge and foundation for much of my work. Many threads have contributed to this cloth, as the enslaved were from diverse cultures. The threads are a continuation of origin cloth histories that traveled across the Atlantic in the hulls of slave ships from the shores of West Africa before landing in North America. Once on the shores of this continent, many threads were severed as slavers separated families, tribes, and languages. Often enslaved persons were selected for a specialized expertise: for their knowledge of cultivating crops such as cotton, tobacco, rice, or indigo, or for their mastery of skills like construction, metalworking, blacksmithing, weaving, pottery, or basketry.[8] The enslaved rewove the severed threads into a new cloth, one that had not previously existed, though the origin or "root" remained. This is not unlike the centuries-old practice in African villages of unweaving and reweaving cloth procured from western traders to create new textiles. In the transplanted land, which would become the new home, the new cloth represents a new culture, one that continues to inspire and inform.[9]


*Figure 7:* Ancestor Ink

*Figure 8:* Soil-based paint




*Figures 9 (left) and 10:* Earth

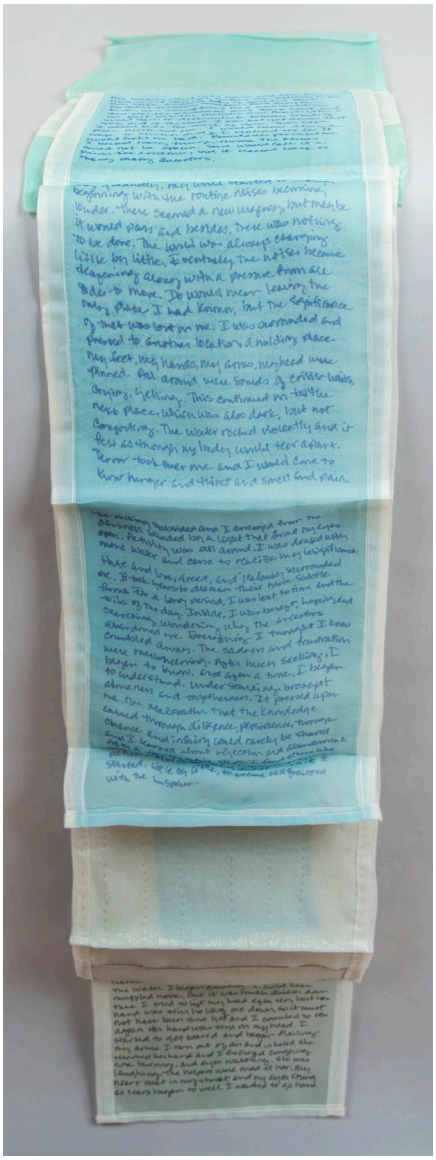


*Figure 11:* Water

In each book of the *Elemental* series, the viewer is required to perform the work as they are invited to partake in a ritual that slowly reveals the message. *Earth* (figs. 9 and 10) addresses the corpus and consists of layers of folded cloth. The imagery and text are separated into "outer" and "inner" by a cloth panel. The viewer must unbutton the panel to access the "inner" body, a deliberate act that slows the reader down and denotes the time it takes to get to know someone on an intimate basis.

The text in *Water* (fig. 11) is revealed by unfolding three silk accordion cascades of successive length, each containing an independent story. Various textures of cloth represent the way in which water is able to move from solid to liquid to gas. Water not only has the potential to heal and to quench, but also to cause devastation. Each story in the "waterfall" complements the symbology of water—that of creation, time, passage, and purification.

The cover of *Fire* (figs. 12 and 13) is wool felt, a material traditionally used for fire blankets. As the book opens, the viewer is taken through the stages of physical fire through colored cloth. The act of slowly unrolling a long cloth scroll reveals a Passion-like[10] account of a school desegregation experience. The cloth of the scroll is very soft in texture, taking the viewer by hand while moving through an uncomfortable story. At the center of *Fire* is a symbol of transformation, the outcome of fire on matter, the transformative power of action, understanding, and experience.

The materials in my books function as my personal tools for resistance against the pull of assimilation. In the twentieth-century period of English-speaking dominance in Louisiana, Creole culture began to be thought of as "backward." Schools began to promote assimilation, which included the discouragement, often by force, of many customs, including the speaking of Louisiana Creole. Many parents came to believe that assimilation into "Mericain" culture, as they called it, would help to shield their children from the harms of stereotypes and racism, offering them greater opportunity for advancement. As a result of efforts favoring assimilation, their language, which was my grandmother's first language and likely the only one known by my great-grands and before, is now endangered.

Root reading is a way to reconcile my semi-nomadic upbringing. I speak at a distance from the root (Creole), but still connected to it, having heard many stories about my ancestors while belonging to, but remaining on, the outside. My parents' Creole language was heard often enough to understand its connection to root, but not frequently enough to learn to speak it. Language is a carrier of values fashioned by a people over a period of time. Historically, colonial systems impose their tongues and then downgrade the vernacular



*Figures 12 (left) and 13:* Fire

tongues of the people.[11] Because my parents were discouraged from speaking Creole growing up, as adults they spoke it only privately, and my interaction with it was sporadic. And because it was rare, it seemed and seems mysterious. My parents' language was their heritage and, by extension, my heritage too. Though I can claim no hometown for myself, having traveled from station to station because of my dad's career, my experience is not too dissimilar from those who can claim otherwise, because from a cultural aspect, we are all to some degree removed from root. However, distance (that is, being on the outside) can bring a peculiar view to something observed from afar. One can grasp a kernel of the soul of belonging to a culture—the traditions and ways of living that persist in a community living outside of the mainstream. Distance can be beneficial to seeing. Being removed from root can provide space for appreciation of a language or other cultural aspect. *Island Girl* (fig. 14) presents a story of rejection, acceptance, and pride in the form of a cloth dress that features Louisiana Creole phrases. The cloth dress reminds the reader throughout the story of the negative effects that economic factors, coupled with the attitudes and actions of adults, have on children.

To enter a dialogue with and to preserve a history are valuable to those within and outside a culture. When the culture is recognized as "other," artist books allow for inclusion of multiple modes of expression. These forms can consist of clues that relate to spoken and unspoken traditions. If history is communicated through an action and the action and its meaning are widespread within the culture, what clues could be built into a book to relay the importance of the action? *Emergence* (fig. 15) is a book in three parts: two drum leaf–bound books and a candle. Each component is symbolic in text, form, and tone, and the components are suggestive of those used in the Roman Catholic Mass, since Catholicism is woven into Louisiana Creole culture. The form of the entire work is that of a lectern, chosen because "truth" is often delivered or associated within a religious context. The text featured in the first book, *Litany*, is a recitation of superstitions, while the text in the second book, *Election*, contains a mantra of self-examination and determination. In the center, the third "book," a candle carved with biased and stereotypical information and embedded with a medal of St. Michael the Archangel, dispeller of demons, symbolizes both the Paschal candle placed on the altar and a tool used in exorcism, or purging, of untruth. The two books, *Litany* and *Election*, placed at opposing sides and performed as call and response, pull the viewer in opposite directions. The flexibility of the artist book can accommodate both general and esoteric cues such as those presented in *Emergence*. The uninitiated will understand the holder of a text to be more than a substrate. And the initiated will understand the presentation of the book as part of the ritual and recollection. Both initiated and uninitiated will gain nuanced understanding of the message.

*Figure 14:* Island Girl


*Figure 15:* Emergence

The family stories (histories) passed to me growing up were oral accounts. Later I would be introduced to written accounts when I gained access to a generous archive collected and maintained by my late aunt, the same aunt who presented four-year-old me with my first book. The methods in which the oral stories were shared—over hair-care rituals, creative pursuits, and food—are as significant as the actual stories. Charged materials used in artist books function in much the same way as objects used in customs and rituals: they underscore the delivery of the message and serve as memory prompts. When shared with others, an artist book, like these customs and rituals, can connect those within and outside of communities flung across many countries and continents to a common denominator and to enhanced understanding of root. Awareness brings about increased understanding of our histories and of ourselves. It can, for example, instill pride as it fosters a new appreciation of a culture much maligned and often appropriated. Our roots tell us we are not alone.

*I dip my feet in the mud, I get a hold of my roots. I spread my arms and bask in the sun and wind . . . I can breathe.*—Tunu: The Gift[12]

## NOTES

1. *Tunu: The Gift*, directed by Jordan Riber (Media for Development International, 2017), 1:26. Accessed at mfdi.org.

2. Mark P. Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry, "Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen: An Interpretation of African American Belief Systems Based on the Uses of Archaeology and Folklore Sources," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 372–403. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/541368.

3. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Culture* (New York: James Curry Publishers, 2005), 23–72.

4. E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1988): 18–41. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/2713140.

5. Deborah Brandt, "Drafting U.S. Literacy," *College English* 66, no. 5 (2004): 485–502. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/4140731.

6. Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (1995): 45–76. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/2211360.

7. Paulette M. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender," *Duke Law Journal* 1991, no. 2 (1991): 365–96. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/1372731.

8. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 29–40, 73–74.

9. Jessica Hemmings, "Appropriated Threads: The Unpicking and Reweaving Imported Textiles" (2002), 524. Accessed at digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/524.

10. Passion named here refers to the Latin, *passio*, or suffering, and is capitalized in reference to the Passion, or suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ (for the greater good) in the Christian tradition. Though the story contained in *Fire* accounts for suffering and sacrifice, it does not include torture or death.

11. wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 13.

12. *Tunu: The Gift.*

This essay was supported in part by a grant from the College Book Art Association.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). Well-respected and thorough text on the history of people of African descent in Louisiana, including language and customs in Africa and Louisiana.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008). Thorough description of upheaval that occurred across the African continent during colonial expansion.

Kein, Sybil, ed., *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000). In-depth history of Louisiana Creole culture and language.

Rosette, Ashleigh Shelby, and Tracy L. Dumas. "The Hair Dilemma: Conform to Mainstream Expectations or Emphasize Racial Identity." *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 14 (2007): 407–422. Accessed at scholarship.law.duke.edu/djglp/vol14/iss1/13.

Scheub, Harold. "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature." *African Studies Review* 28 (1985): 1–72. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/524603. In-depth discussion of African oral traditions.

Serrano, Angel, and Toepke, Alvaro, dir. *The Language You Cry In* (California Newsreel, 1998). Accessed at newsreel.org/video/the-language-you-cry-in. A documentary account of how a song sung by a woman in South Carolina recorded in the early twentieth century by Dr. Lorenzo Turner was years later confirmed to be linked to a tribe in Sierra Leone. Dr. Turner (1890–1972), a noted linguist and former chair of the English departments at Howard and Fisk Universities, is known as the "father" of Gullah studies.


*Envelopes ready to be mailed with prints for Volume 1, Number 3 of Tim Svenonius's subscription series.*

# BOOK ARTS SUBSCRIPTIONS

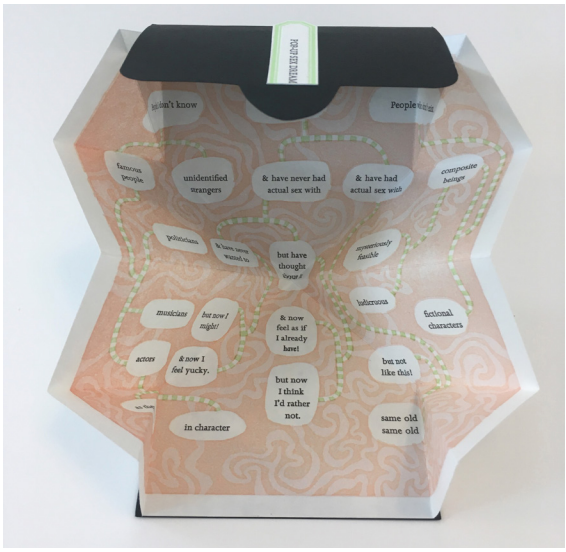
*by Stephanie Wolff*

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE opening your mailbox to find a hand-addressed envelope with some art enclosed. Over the almost thirty years I have been making books, I've noticed that a number of artists who work in the book arts offer serial subscriptions of some kind. Even before crowd-funding and online sales sites, some artists made books or prints, usually smaller, more modest pieces, that sold in the manner of traditional mailed magazine subscriptions. Pay your money and receive a regular mailing of a piece of art—prints, ephemera, zines, or pamphlets.

What does it take to create a successful subscription series? What advantages are there for an artist to produce one? And why should a subscriber sign up? I've been curious about this for some time, so I reached out to a handful of artists with current or past subscription series to find out.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Stephanie Wolff works with paper, text, textile, and the book form, often on themes of weather, science, history, and rural life. She has been awarded a creative research fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society and was Artist in Residence at the Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University. Her work has been exhibited in the US and Germany, and is in many collections, public and private. Stephanie teaches book arts techniques both online and in person, sharing her knowledge from many years in bookbinding, conservation, and fine arts. stephaniewolffstudio.com, @stephaniewolffstudio.*


As one might imagine, organizational skills, good time management, and business smarts are key aspects for producing a successful subscription series. Perhaps most importantly, though, are clear reasons for embarking on one, a sense of the project's scope, and a focus for the content. There are many reasons to create a subscription series, and these revolve around issues of business, creativity, and connection.

Probably the best business reason is the financial security of a predetermined and regular budget. Because work is pre-sold, an artist knows the amount of money available for the production, and the cash is available to pay entire costs up front. An artist can choose to limit the expenses to the income the subscription generates, or add to it, but at least this guaranteed amount is known prior to production. Subscriber numbers also allow for a more accurate determination of an edition size, with less likelihood of an overproduction that never sells.

Since sales largely occur prior to creation, an artist can focus their energy on ideas for new work, rather than selling individual pieces. Coriander Reisbord, whose ten-year series of small works ended in 2009, liked the subscription model, as she found that it changed the balance of power between artist and collector, since each side commits to the work before it is made. "I never enjoyed selling my editioned artist books; by the time one's finished, I'm kind of done with it, not excited anymore, and so the work of selling it felt like a real chore." The subscription series, she says, "was a good way to make sure I kept my eyes open looking for ideas."

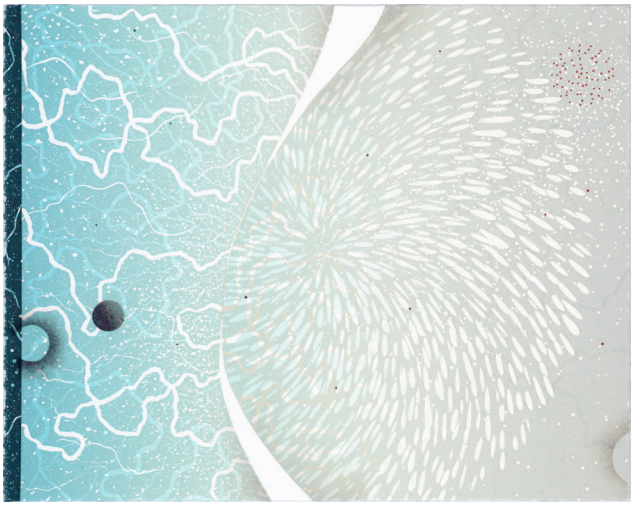
The obligation and challenge of a regular production schedule can help with idea generation, as ideas tend to multiply from consistent studio explorations during creation of new work. Sarah Nicholls, whose *Brain Washing from Phone Towers* pamphlet series has been published since 2015, has worked on some large-scale handmade maps, "thinking through ways," she says, "of visually representing the different layers of time that I write about in the series." Pati Scobey's subscription prints evolved from her studio work and her thoughts during the period of their creation:

> My work is process-oriented and I improvise as I develop images. Often, I begin with an inkling of what I might want the print or book to be, and the print or book evolves out of the process.

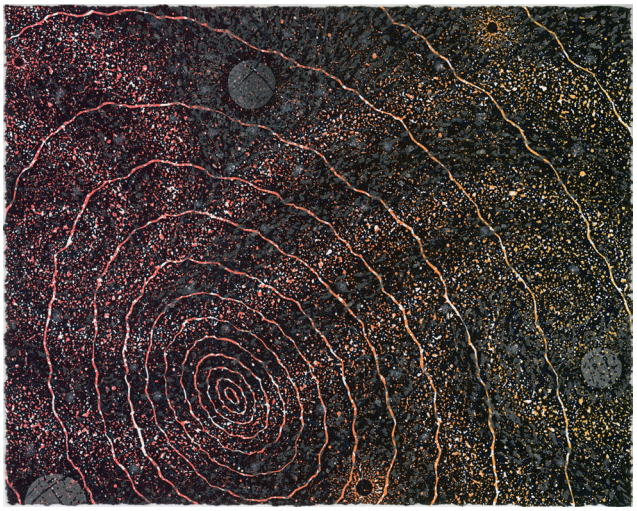
Due dates also help with accountability in order to meet the financial commitment to subscribers. There is nothing like a hard deadline to bring a project to completion. And completing work brings satisfaction.

Monkeymind *(left). Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Somerset paper. Pop-up folder.*

Pop-Up Sex Dream Flow-Chart. *Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Twinrocker handmade paper with a Fabriano paper cover. 3.5 inches square, closed; 6.75 inches interior, opened.*



Wanderer, *by Pati Scobey, December 2012. Four press runs with linoleum cuts and type, and hand stenciling.*



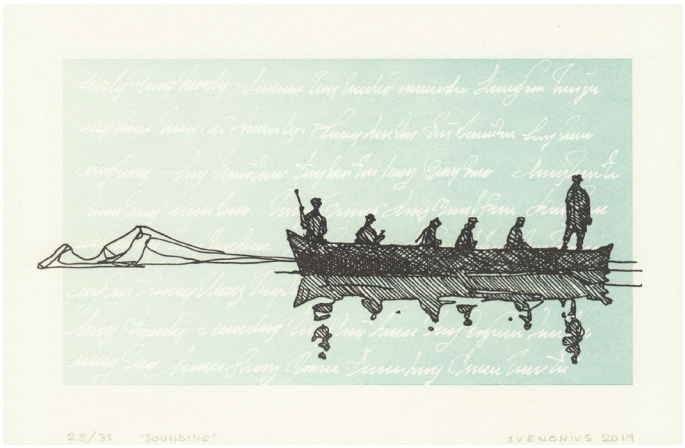
A Scattering of Light *by Pati Scobey, December 2013. Four press runs of linoleum cuts, with one cut for reduction printing. Finished with watercolor brushwork.*

The financial support provided by pre-selling work allows the artist to take some creative risks if they choose. That security may allow for some experimentation of methods, and technical skills get honed with regular studio work. Scobey found this to be true as she produced her subscription series of prints from 2004 to 2014.

> Over the ten years, I used my Vandercook more than I ever had previously. I honed my printing skills and figured out various technical problems. My inking skills became more consistent.

Tim Svenonius, whose print subscription started in 2019, says,

> The earliest prints were quirky and idiosyncratic, because with every edition I would experiment with a new technique. Over time I developed an arsenal of tricks and methods, so I could say the subscription helped me develop a style and a method.



Soundings, *2019. Tim Svenonius. Two-color letterpress print on Classic Crest 110# natural white cover weight. 5.5" × 8.5". Edition of 30.*

Cabal, *2019. Print by Tim Svenonius. Two-color letterpress print on Crane's Lettra 110# pearl white cover weight. 5.5" × 8.5". Edition of 20.*


*An array of* Ker-bloom! *issues. Letterpress printed zines by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.*


Ker-bloom! *158:* The Beautiful Game, *September/October 2022. Letterpress printed zine by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.*

A byproduct of a subscription series is the community of subscribers that results. For some artists this community exists only as a spreadsheet or on file cards, while others actively connect with this group. Karen Switzer/Artnoose has published her letterpress printed zine, *Ker-bloom!*, for twenty-five years. She says,

> At this point my zine has momentum, and there are people who have been reading my zine for decades. I've had subscribers go away for a while and then find me again several years later, and I still have their old Rolodex address cards on file from some other state. I have even had people subscribe because they found my old zines in their mom's zine collection. Imagine that—having multiple generations of readers.

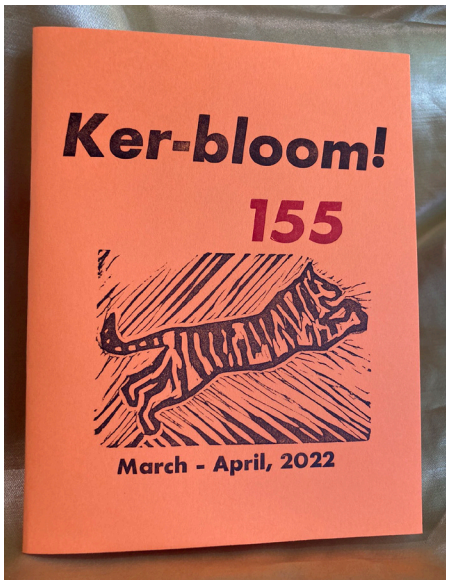
Many artists connect regularly through email newsletters with their audience. Nicholls creates programming such as walking tours in conjunction with her series. She says,

> I don't think of the pamphlets just as commodities; I think of them as a community-building exercise that produces income, relationships, experiences, social connections, and conversation.

Much like any cultural object, such as a novel or a performance, these subscription pieces can become central to wider interaction. All artists build a relationship with their reader/viewers, engaging them in work over a period of time in a (generally) one-sided conversation. Nicholls's events allow for dialog, between artist and reader, but also between readers.

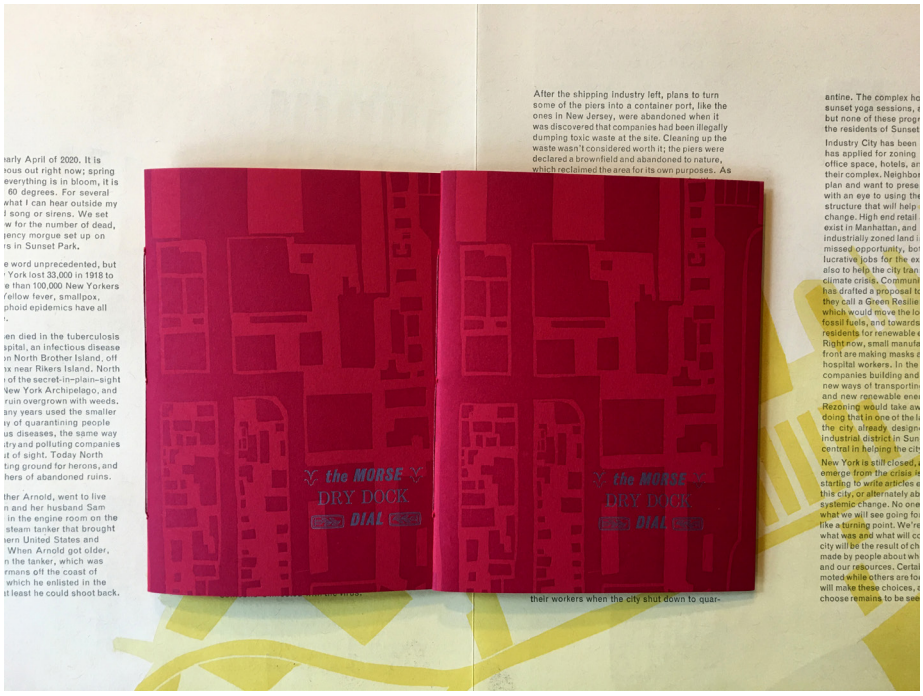
Regular communication with subscribers and consistent production can provide opportunities for an artist to expand beyond the borders of the series itself, through teaching, lecturing, or exhibiting. For Nicholls this seems especially true:

> It is the main thing that I have become known for. All of the opportunities that I have been fortunate to receive in recent years have come about as a result of the pamphlets. I have built a community with the series. I have reframed my approach to printing and publishing, and I have been pushed to work more in public, doing walks and working with collaborators.

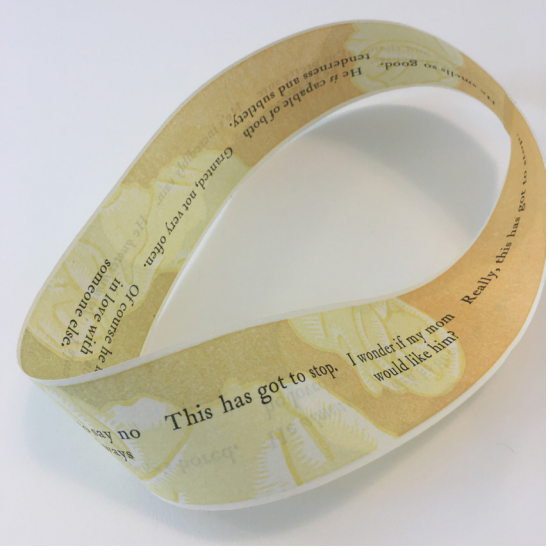



Ker-bloom! *155:* First Gay Morning, *March/April 2022. Letterpress printed zine by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.*


Elm Street, *Summer 2021*, Brain Washing from Phone Towers *informational pamphlet by Sarah Nicholls. Letterpress and linoleum cut on paper. Edition of 300.*




The Morse Dry Dock Dial, *Spring 2020*, Brain Washing from Phone Towers *informational pamphlet by Sarah Nicholls. Letterpress and linoleum cut on paper. Edition of 250.*





Unrequited Crush. *Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Arches Text Wove. Möbius strip.*

Blessed Are the Peacemakers *(November 2002). Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Twinrocker paper. Flexagon. 3" hexagonal sides.*

Without active community building, a link still exists between reader and artist, whether either side acknowledges it or not. Reisbord appreciated the individual connection between herself and subscribers.

> I liked that the experience, one reader [to] one artist, wouldn't and couldn't scale. I found myself deliberately making things that didn't photograph well, that couldn't really be understood without being able to manipulate them physically, that were too small for one person to be able to show them to more than one other person at a time, all because I was enjoying the intimacy that restriction facilitated.

The scope of the series needs to be carefully considered—the number of titles in a subscription period, the number of copies produced, and the complexity of the work itself.

The artists interviewed have produced between two and six titles per year. The amount is often based on an artist's other commitments, but may also be based on the simplicity or complexity of their series. As in other artwork, there does seem to be two distinct phases in producing a subscription series: content development and physical production, the time the latter takes being more quantifiable than the former.

A framework for the series, such as preplanning the year's subscription topics and setting a calendar of deadlines, can help minimize costs and stress. In production terms, an artist must consider whether to maintain a consistent size, format, or means of production. Some of the artists found that consistency of format or size restricted creativity, while others found it helpful. Another factor in decision-making is whether to determine the size of the work by envelope size and postage costs. Almost every artist mentioned the challenges of shipping and its associated costs, and recommended careful attention to this aspect.

There seems to be a wide range in the number of subscribers: anywhere between 20 and 130. Similarly, there is a wide range in copies of each piece produced: between 2 and 300. Those whose work is a two-dimensional print or simple zine can produce more pieces more quickly than those whose work involves complex handwork. Many of the artists adjusted their edition numbers before finding the right amount, and most produced extra pieces for individual sales, usually sold at a higher cost. "Big enough to be worth setting the type, small enough that I wouldn't discard an idea just because it was complicated to assemble/construct," Reisbord says of her edition size of 60, which never changed over the entire run of her series. Tammy Nguyen, who publishes *Martha's Quarterly*, has a different


Cicada Practices. *Issue 2, Winter 2016, of* Martha's Quarterly, *published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Woodblock and letterpress printing. Edition of 150.*

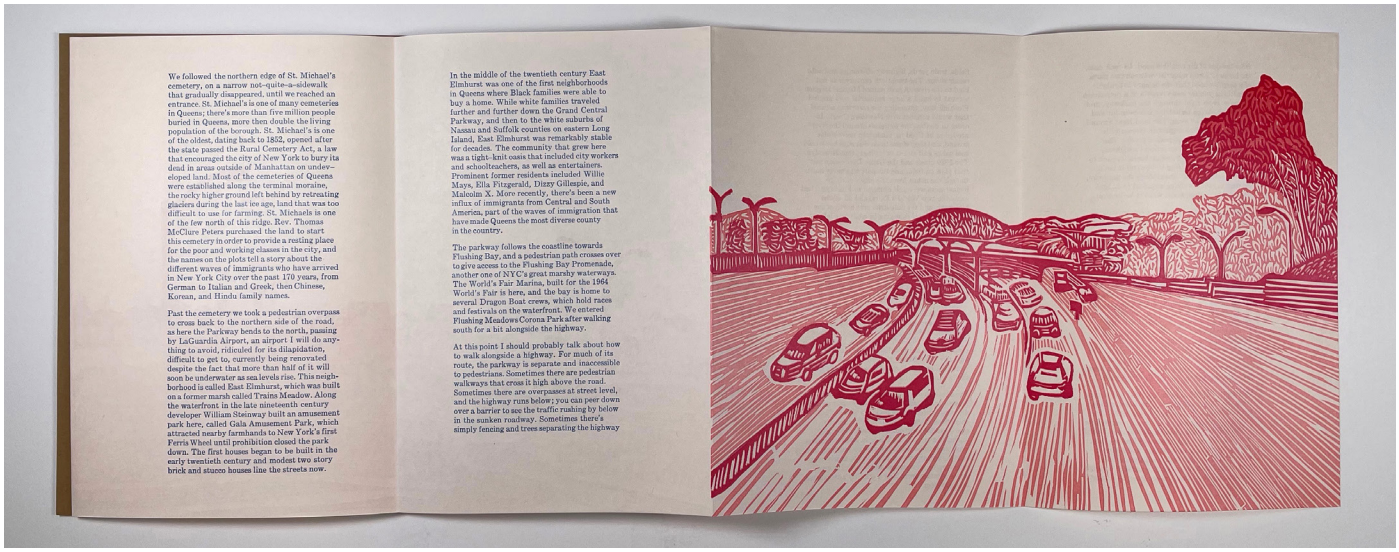

Fields of Fungus and Sunflowers. *Issue 6, Winter 2018, of* Martha's Quarterly, *published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Digital printing and polymer press printing. Edition of 160.*

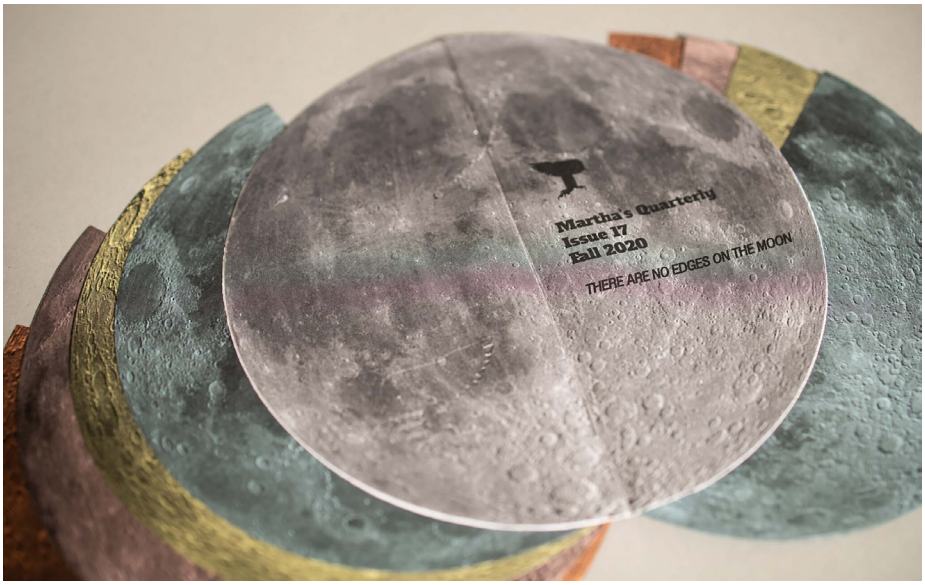
formula for the maximum number of copies: the amount that can be made in one week by two people. While Nicholls produces a significantly larger number of pieces per issue than subscribers, she is less concerned with her subscriber numbers than with having an interested group reading them. "I think that my goal isn't necessarily to grow my list as it is to grow my community and make it a strong community." Her subscriber list "ebbs and flows, and most issues sell out, and it's a self-sustaining venture."

Most of the artists didn't lose money producing the series, but some did not pay themselves a wage. Finding subscribers didn't seem particularly difficult for these artists and was mostly through word of mouth, as well as via bookfairs and online through social media, Patreon (an online site that supports projects or people), or Etsy. A free add-a-friend option for subscribers has helped spread the word for Nicholls's series. How to retain subscribers is another concern. Strategies that have worked include using online automatic renewals or slipping in a reminder with the last issue.

At the heart of the series is the content. A clear sense of what topics the series will explore—whether over a year or an issue—is important. Whether research-based, memoir, commentary, or purely visual, having at least a broad theme helps both the creation of that content and the marketing of the series as a whole. Nguyen wants to connect disparate stories over her subscription series. In each issue she brings together multifaceted concepts—ideas that don't always seem like they relate—presented in an artist book format, with an accompanying essay she has written to help connect them.

A series can allow an artist to engage in a subject over multiple pieces if they choose, building on an idea and sharing these in succession. Nicholls's work often focuses on the environment: issues of climate change, urban ecology, and the history of her home, New York City. She researches and writes the content for each edition, and to make the research easier, a narrower theme is chosen for each year: "Last year was maps, the year before was urban weeds. [2021] is parkways." These themes unify the year's publications, though the physical form of the pamphlet may vary from issue to issue.



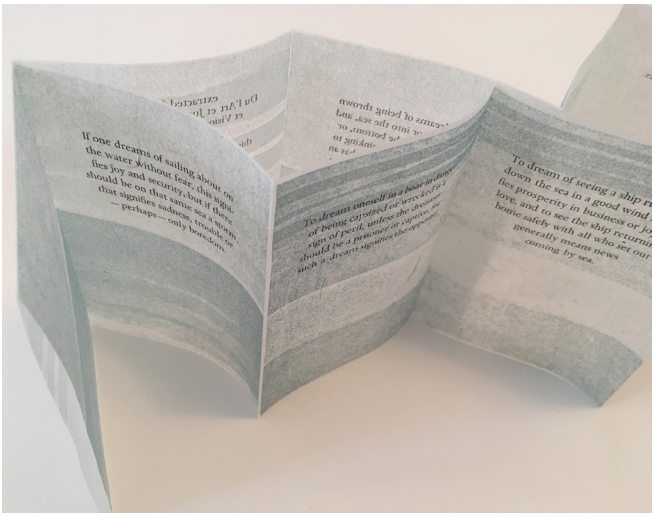

Where the Sidewalk Ends *(above)*, *Spring 2022*, Brain Washing from Phone Towers *informational pamphlet by Sarah Nicholls. Printed letterpress from metal type and linoleum cut relief blocks. Edition of 250.*

There Are No Edges on the Moon, *Issue 17*, *Fall 2020*, *of* Martha's Quarterly, *published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Xerox printing and laser cutting. Edition of 200.*

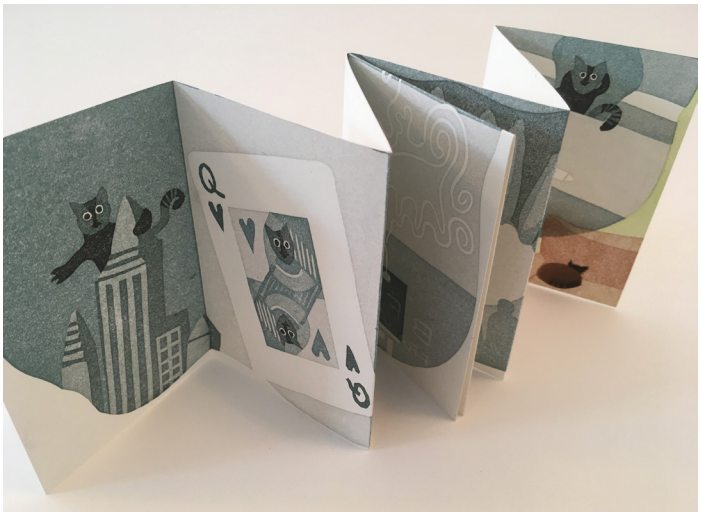
Consideration of the audience is also important. Nicholls thinks of the content for her series in relationship to the audience. It's geared to any contemporary reader, not necessarily someone with knowledge of art, and the writing reflects that goal of accessibility. She says her pamphlets "are responsive to the current time. I think the pamphlets are all one project, produced in a series of small bursts. They are inspired by ephemera," with the work meant to be widely distributed and read, and handled immediately.

Nguyen would like a subscriber to read an issue of *Martha's Quarterly* and realize it's the thing they didn't know they wanted to read. She wants it to be "reading for humble and normal places." Like some other artists interviewed, Nguyen works in media other than subscriptions, including artist books, and thinks about building a whole environment of her work, wanting a full range from affordable to more expensive pieces.

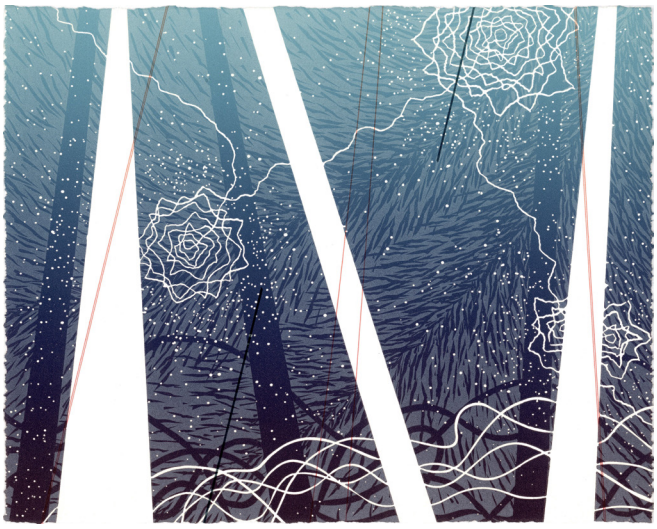
Subscription series can introduce a reader to an artist's body of work, but that's not usually a goal of the artists interviewed. Reisbord feels like the work she made had to have some "universal appeal for the subscription series." Her other art doesn't need to resonate with anyone else.



9 Seafaring Dreams *by Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on thin Japanese kozo paper. One-sheet structure. The text was taken from* De l'art et jugement des songes et visions nocturnes *(1619), a book of dream interpretation the artist repaired for a client. The translations are her own.*



Nine Lives *by Coriander Reisbord, December 2003. Letterpress and reduction linoleum cut on Rives BFK. One-sheet structure. 3 × 4.25 inches folded; 12 × 8.5 inches unfolded.*



Intermittence *by Pati Scobey, December 2006. Four press runs, two from linoleum cuts and two from letterpress rule.*

> If I'm going to send it to more than one person, it can't be something so personal that only I will get the joke. If it's a unique thing, it can be as opaque as I want and if it finds another person in the world, that's fine, but it's not a goal of mine.

Since subscription series tend to offer modest artworks, it could be an opportunity to create small pieces as preparation for a more complex artist book or to test one's interest in a subject. *Martha's Quarterly* is a regularly produced small offering in between larger projects for Nguyen, and sometimes it's a way to explore a topic for other aspects of her art practice, even if it isn't very clear how they relate.

One result of a long-term project with regular production is a body of work. The content of Scobey's relief prints reflects her rural location and the natural world. "My goal was to have each print connect to other prints in the series yet remain visually distinct," she says. Her final set of twenty prints from the ten-year project is "a small cohesive body of work. Without creating this goal for myself, I don't think I would have made this series, which can comprise a small exhibit."

As a subscriber to a handful of series, I know firsthand the delight in being on the receiving end of a subscription. Yes, there's the obvious benefit: the item that regularly appears in my mailbox, giving me another bite-sized piece of Artnoose's life story, or telling me about Brooklyn's history and the questions around its future through a contemporary environmental lens in a *Brain Washing from Phone Towers* pamphlet, or connecting disparate subjects and offering me new insights in an essay in *Martha's Quarterly*.


A Chronicle of Images, *prints by Pati Scobey, 2004–2014. Top left: Custom box containing the twenty subscription prints, the title page, and interleaving with text about each print printed on translucent paper. Top right: Title page. Bottom left:* Shifting, *December 2008. Bottom center:* Intermittence *with interleaving, December 2006. Bottom right:* Inside the Song, *June 2011.*

But there are at least a handful of other benefits. A subscription provides ongoing support to an artist—not only in terms of financial assistance, but also in the way it signals admiration for the work itself and a belief in the artist's creative process. Subscriptions can provide the start of an art collection with a small investment. These pieces can be wonderful teaching examples, whether for their writing, format, or technique. Subscribing to a series can connect people to a community of others who are reading, talking, or thinking about the same artwork, or who are all interested in a common subject or artist. Sometimes there are direct conversations, or interaction on social media sites, or even possibilities for participation in events related to the series, expanding on the content. Another positive aspect to being a subscriber is the delivery of new art or writing that might be outside of one's regular pattern of reading or viewing—the possibility of new perspectives otherwise overlooked.

These days there are many ways for artists to receive support for their work and art practice. The internet makes it easier than ever to run a business as an artist, selling directly to a buyer without a dealer or gallery. Web hosting and sales platforms offer mailing lists, automatic renewals, and shipping assistance. But the web also makes it harder to set oneself apart from the multitude of others with something to sell. A buyer has to be looking for an artist's work, and the work needs to be easily found. Creative funding options have evolved, such as Patreon, Kickstarter (which helps raise money for individual projects before they begin), and other crowdsourced funding platforms.

Artist books can be costly to produce and expensive to purchase. Making them takes significant time, and more people are now doing so. Libraries and museums face shrinking budgets, and finding collectors can be a challenging task. Marketing work can have substantial costs: bookfair expenses, shipping, insurance, etc. Selling an artist book often means paying a commission to a gallery or dealer, which can be well worth it, as tending to the sales end of an art practice may not be an artist's interest or strength.

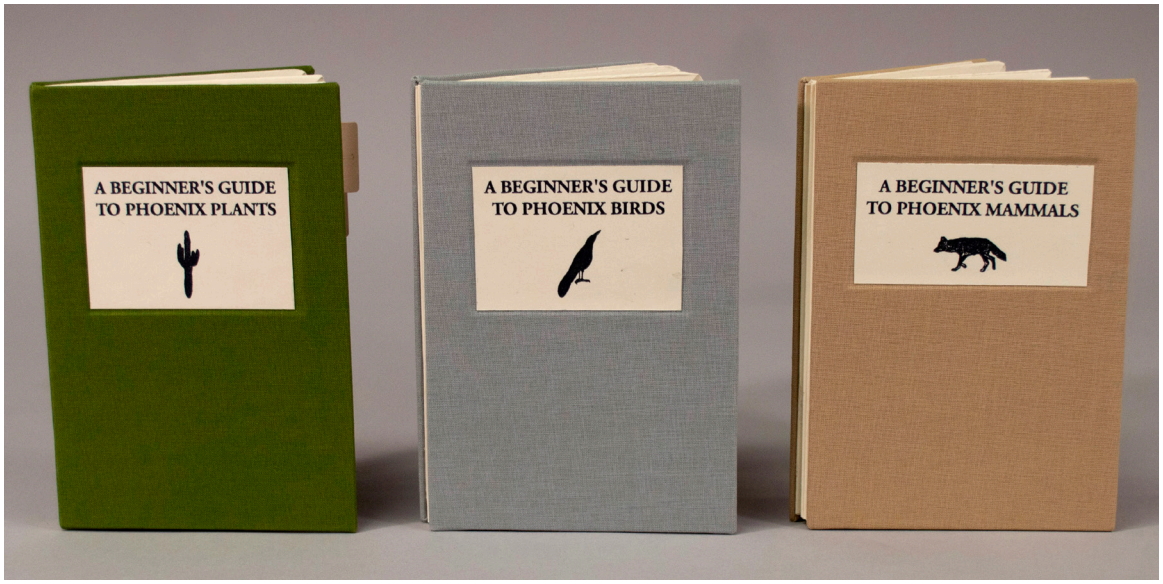
The business model of a subscription series flips the traditional sales scenario around. Marketing happens upfront, and a sales push could be of a concentrated duration before moving on to the creation phase. For artists with little interest in longer-term complex projects, a number of smaller works produced regularly with a subscription series might be a good strategy to consider. For whatever reason artists produce their subscription series, I'm glad they do. I always look forward to opening my mailbox. ■

| Artist interviewed | Dates active | Number of subscribers | Copies per issue | Issues per year | Cost | Website |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tammy Nguyen: *Martha's Quarterly* | Since 2016 | 130 | 150–200 | 4 | $40 | passengerpigeonpress.com |
| Sarah Nicholls: *Brain Washing from Phone Towers* | Since 2015 | 50–70 | 200–300 | 3 | $50 | sarahnicholls.com |
| Coriander Reisbord | 1999–2009 | 60 | 60 | 3 | $50 | corybooks.com |
| Pati Scobey | 2004–2014 | 115 | 100–150 | 2 | $60 | patiscobey.com |
| Tim Svenonius | Since 2019 | 20–40 | 20–50 | 12 (half year also available) | $160 | lostlatitudes.net |
| Karen Switzer /Artnoose: *Ker-bloom!* | Since 1996 | 120 | 250 | 6 | $20 | etsy.com/shop/artnoose patreon.com/artnoose |

**Other subscription series in the book arts:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Hope Amico, formerly Gutwrench Press | hopeamico.com | *Keep Writing* |
| Central Print | centralprint.org | *Play on Words* |
| Jennifer Farrell, Starshaped Press | starshaped.com | *Print Club* |
| Lisa Rappoport, Littoral Press | littoralpress.com | Letterpress subscription series |
| Lindsay Schmittle, Gingerly Press | gingerlypress.com | *Hot off the Press* |
| Rachel Simmons | rachelsimmons.net | *The Heartbreaker Zine Maker Club* |
| The Southern Letterpress | thesouthernletterpress.com | Letterpress postcard subscription |
| Carolyn Swiszcz | carolynswiszcz.com | *Zebra Cat Zebra* |

Interviews conducted via email correspondence with Nicholls, Reisbord, Scobey, Svenonius, and Switzer, and telephone conversation with Nguyen. All conducted by Stephanie Wolff, Spring–Fall 2021.




*Daniella Napolitano*, A Beginner's Guide to Phoenix Flora and Fauna, *2019. Handmade blizzard books. Hand-set type, photopolymer print, and pressure print. 4.25 × 6.25 inches each. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIELLA NAPOLITANO

*Interview by Bobby Lee*

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER**

*Bobby Lee is a photographer and book artist interested in landscape, nature, and conceptions of place. Originally from Southern California, he loves to travel and explore deserts, mountains, and cities with equal curiosity. He is currently an MFA candidate in art at the University of Nevada, Reno, exploring the intersections of photography and book arts with AB Gorham, director of the Black Rock Press. bleephoto.com.*

FROM BOOKS, WORKSHOPS, internships, traditional degrees, and certificates to internet searches on YouTube, there are many ways that students are learning about book arts. One of the great things about the field is its versatility in connecting to different media, ideas, and purposes. We wanted to learn more about current and recently graduated students of book arts, where they're coming from, what they're thinking about, and how they're incorporating bookmaking into their art, work, and careers. In the first of a series of interviews with book arts students, we talked to MFA graduate student Daniella Napolitano (she/her/hers).

*Please tell us a little about yourself and where you are in your education/career. What was your path to book arts?*

My name is Daniella Napolitano, and I am a third-year MFA graduate printmaking student in the School of Art at Arizona State University. My introduction to book arts was in undergrad when I studied abroad in Florence, Italy, and took my first artist books class. Through my undergraduate university's study abroad program, I attended Studio Arts College International (SACI), an American school based in Florence. However, it recently closed due to COVID-19 in 2021.

I was instantly hooked on how intimate the art form can be. I've always been a hands-on person and loved that with artist books, you can hold and touch the art. When I started my graduate studies at Arizona State University, an advisor suggested the book arts studio course, and I remembered how much I loved making books in undergrad. I took the course, and my professor (now thesis chair), Heather Green, was instrumental in helping me figure out how to incorporate books into my current research.



*Two details of* A Beginner's Guide to Phoenix Flora and Fauna, *2019. Handmade blizzard books. Handset type, photopolymer print, and pressure print. 4.25 × 6.25 inches each. Photos courtesy of the artist.*

*What do you like most about working with book arts? How are you incorporating book arts into your practice?*

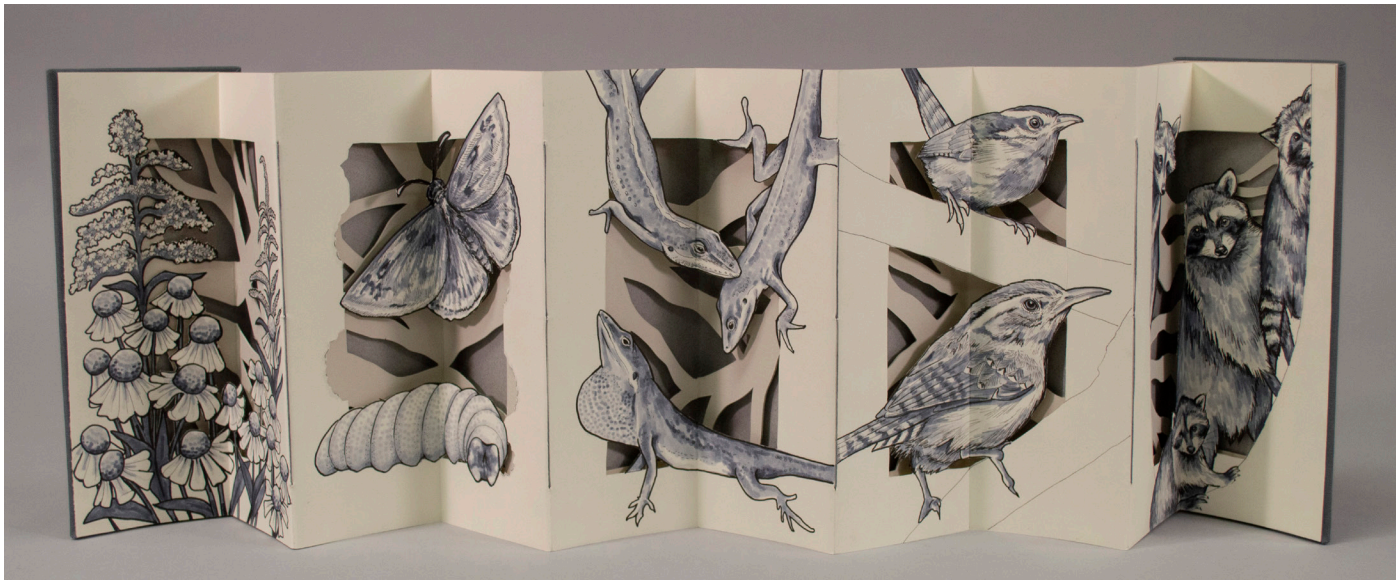
As I mentioned before, I'm a very hands-on person. I was that kid who would press every "try me" button in the toy aisle. So I immediately like any kind of art I can interact with. With book arts the viewer can pick up an intricately made book to get a closer look at small details and illustrations in a way that they couldn't if it was shown behind glass in a frame. I have also found that printmaking and book arts are such a good match because of the ease of creating multiples. Sometimes I will make books out of extra prints that I have lying around and experiment with how I can transform them into another form. I'm also an avid reader, and some of my favorite books as a child were the science books that had multiple flaps to look under and cellophane overlays for diagrams. My current research deals with the interactions between humans and the animals that live around them. Field guides, science books, and field journals are all inspirations for my current body of work.

*What is one new technique you learned/mastered in a recent project, and is it something you will carry over into future work?*

Some of my favorite techniques are folded book structures like the simple accordion book, carousel book, squeeze-box, etc. But one that I was the most excited to apply to my own work was Hedi Kyle's blizzard book. It is a wonderfully adaptable pocket structure. I used it for a set of letterpress printed field guide cards, *A Beginner's Guide to Phoenix Flora and Fauna*, and I've been wanting to expand that project ever since.

*What is a technique, process, or skill you would like to learn?*

I tend to gravitate toward folded book structures because I am not the best at binding. I would love to be able to practice different sewn structures and learn more complex binding techniques.



*What's one challenge that you've faced in book arts or in your art practice?*

The biggest challenge I've faced in my art practice regarding book arts is time. Printmaking and book arts are both time-intensive processes. I'm in a graduate program and there is not enough time for everything I want to do, *especially* when it comes to making books.

*Can you tell us about a completed or in-progress project that you're excited about?*

I defended my thesis and graduated from Arizona State University in May 2022. My thesis exhibition, *Have You Seen Me? A Guide to Noticing and Understanding*, was a call to action for people to notice their animal neighbors and take the time to understand or appreciate them. The animals depicted in the exhibition are often overlooked, misidentified, or misunderstood. By highlighting "ordinary" urban animals in my work, I remind the viewer that humans share a space with wildlife. I believe the first step to caring about something is knowing it exists. It is generally hard for people to think in abstract concepts, but if you can point out an animal, call it by its name, and pass on information about it, then maybe steps will be taken to understand it better. I personally take simple pleasure in sharing moments with the animals I encounter every day, but it is an impossible task to try to get everyone to love every animal. However, I can hope to help people recognize an animal's place in our shared ecosystem. The biggest challenge in my exhibition was the large accordion book wall installation (20 × 4 × 8 feet). So much of the installation was just a concept on a piece of paper until it was time to install—and I only had three days! Luckily, I had a lot of help from family and friends to get the whole show hung, and my defense went very well.

*What do you wish you had in your studio? (More space? A guillotine? More plants? Windows?)*

I would definitely love more space in my home studio . . . and a press! We have amazing facilities for all kinds of printmaking and book arts at Arizona State University, which will make it all the sadder when I graduate. I've been slowly purchasing supplies one at a time to help round out my home studio so I can continue the art practice I started while in graduate school.

Circle of Life, *2019 (top). Carousel book. Copic marker and Micron pen. 3 × 15 × 6 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

*Detail of* Circle of Life, *2019. Carousel book. Copic marker and Micron pen. Photo courtesy of the artist.*


*Installation view of Daniella Napolitano's thesis project,* Have You Seen Me? A Guide to Noticing and Understanding, *2022. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

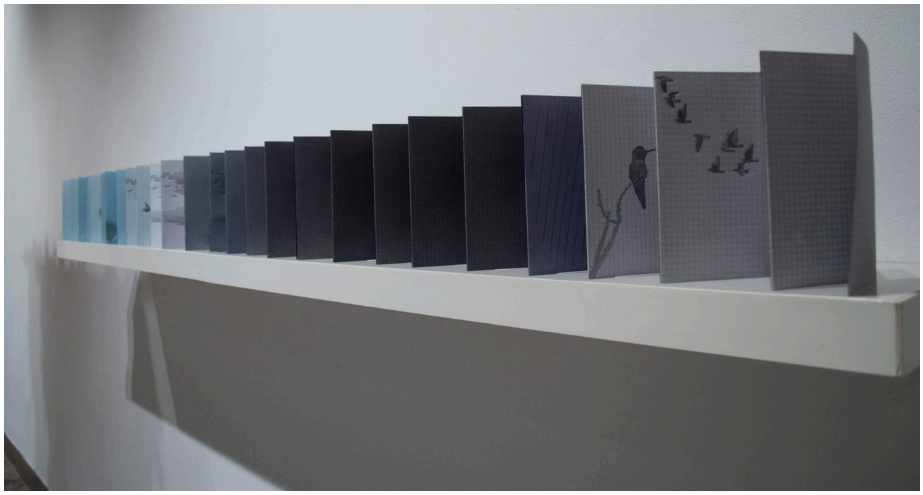

*Detail of large accordion wall installation,* I Think I Saw a Coyote (What does a coyote look like anyway?), *2022. Mixed-media, linocut, monotype, and Risograph, paint, cut paper, plywood, MDF. Approximately 20 × 4 × 8 feet (dimensions variable). Photo courtesy of the artist.*

*Is there a book artist, printer, artist book, or project that you are currently obsessed with?*

I'm constantly fangirling over Keri Miki-Lani Schroeder of Coyote Bones Press, www.kerischroeder.com. The collaboration she did with Julie Chen, *Book of Hours* (2021), is so beautiful, and her boxes are always immaculate.

*If you could give a piece of advice to a new student just starting out in book arts, what would it be?*

Don't let the process intimidate you from trying new things, make *a lot* of mock-ups, and don't be afraid to try again if you make a bad book! Also, keep your fingers away from any blades (always good advice).



24 Hours: A Somewhat Incomplete Study, *2021. Letterpress printed accordion book on hand-dyed BFK Rives. 7 × 125 × 4 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.*


*Detail of* 24 Hours: A Somewhat Incomplete Study, *2021. Letterpress printed accordion book on hand-dyed BFK Rives. 7 × 125 × 4 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

*What are your plans after grad school?*

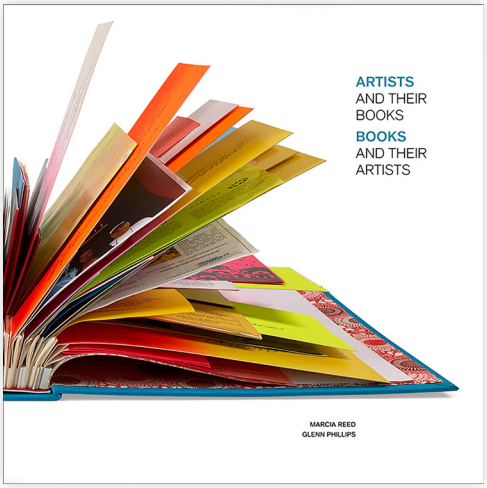
My plans after grad school are to continue teaching at the university level and at art centers in the same area that I'm in now. I'm going to continue printing and making books, although realistically I will likely be making smaller prints and books until I finalize my home studio setup. I'm also very excited to join In Cahoots, incahootsresidency.com, for a residency in Petaluma, California, coming up in the winter! ■

Check out more of Daniella's work and project statements here:
Website: daniellanapolitano.com
Instagram: @theghostcaptain and @ghostprintpress

## Artists and Their Books / Books and Their Artists

by Marcia Reed and Glenn Phillips
The Getty Research Institute, 2018 · 200 pages · ISBN 978-1606065730

*Reviewed by Peter O'Brien*




**THIS FULL-COLOR, HARDBACK,** capacious catalog complements a 2018 Getty exhibition of the same name. The artist books chosen are each given inviting and roomy two-page spreads, and are introduced by colorful, sometimes delightful, commentary.

Of course the perpetual and sometimes tiring questions—what is an artist book?; is there a one-size-fits-all definition of artist books?—are the unseen scaffolding of any such collection.

Is Michael Cherney's (American, born 1969) *Twilight Cranes* an artist book or is it art: a grainy, photographic forty-foot scroll that invokes those well-trodden historic emblems, cranes, and yet also manages to invigorate what we think of when we imagine unfurling a traditional Chinese scroll? I don't know, and I don't really care for an answer.

Is *DOC/UNDOC* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Mexican, born 1955) and Felicia Rice (American, born 1954) an artist book or is it a sculpture: a glitzy, trinkety, multi-textured extravaganza of an art box that invokes and tries to out-splash Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise*? I'm not sure, but I'd say it's more the latter.

Are the two contributions by Beth Thielen (American, born 1953) artist books or are they collections of limited-edition prints, popping with apocalyptic, struggling, disrupting images of homelessness and prison life flung upon dark and swirling nightmare-scapes? I don't care, because the answer limits the work's strength.

And is the enigmatic, audience-activated piece by Keith A. Smith (American, born 1938) an artist book or a performance? *Book 91* has no words to read and no images to look at. It is built to be moved through, to rely on the movements of the body, as our arms and hands slowly turn the hole-punched, string-connected pages. To even ask the question belittles the essential physicality that this work requires.

Marcia Reed opens the catalog with the essay "The Book in General: Some New Definitions," in which she argues that artist books can be seen as "ranking among the most significant recent developments" in both "creating art" and "designing books." She invokes Albrecht Dürer's 1525 diagram-rich treatise on obtaining accurate proportions in the making of images, and the *Mira calligraphiae monumenta* from 1561–96, which intertwines the writing of Georg Bocskay with the lively visual creatures and botanical subjects supplied thirty years later by Joris Hoefnagel.

These references immediately had me thinking of other word- and art-suffused entities, including a collection of interpretations of the Apocalypse gathered in Spain by the monk Beatus of Liébana (c. 740–800) and now housed at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. (And so lovingly documented in Christopher de Hamel's *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World*.) The elaborate and intricate acrostic that opens the manuscript, the colorful pages bursting with overlapping curlicue words, and the images of naked and muscular Adam and Eve, animals, angels, soldiers, maps,

*Peter O'Brien is an independent writer and artist whose most recent book is* Dream Visions: The Art of Alanis Obomsawin, *published by Viggo Mortensen / Perceval Press in 2021. He exhibits and publishes his multi-year artwork LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE internationally.*

trees, and page borders entwined with interwoven lines are all breathtakingly spectacular and curious. It's a book and it's by an artist, or various artists. Therefore . . .

Glenn Phillips also adds an introductory essay, "Rediscovering the Radius of the Discourses, or David Antin's 'Politics of the Artist's Book.'" Phillips encourages us to think of artist books in the "vastly larger field of publishing in general," which encapsulates everything from inexpensive paperbacks to medieval illuminated manuscripts. He uses the term "portable artwork" as one way of addressing these elaborately constructed, decorated, transmitting texts otherwise known as artist books. Phillips knows well that not all such items are portable (for example, the massive construction from 1967, *The Big Book*, by Alison Knowles [American, born 1933], which is described, illustrated, and commented upon in the essay).

The catalog includes a wide selection of work, from well-known artists such as Dieter Roth (Swiss, 1930–98), Ed Ruscha (American, born 1937), and Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007), to names that were new to me, including some of those mentioned in preceding paragraphs. Some names, including Mirella Bentivoglio (Italian, 1922–2017), who participated eight times in exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, can become neglected if we don't continually bring them out of the insistent shadows that passing time issues. Her work included here, *Litolattine*, consists of eight flattened Coca-Cola cans bound together inside rough, blackened, hinged covers made of steel. A crushed bottle cap is affixed to the cover as a sort of precious but disposable seal. Defined by contemporary consumerism and consumption, the piece has a timeless heft, and not only because it invokes the Futurists and a fascination with modern technologies.

The catalog's descriptions for each contribution are just long enough to whet my appetite for more. Describing *Your House* by Olafur Eliasson (Danish, born 1967), Marcia Reed writes:

> *Your House* offers a meditative passage through a major paper monument. Perhaps it might be nice to live there in some alternative spatial dimension.

And here is Reed commenting on *Diderot Project* by Ken Botnick (American, born 1954):

> This work reminds us that the word *project* can also mean *propel*: it is as if the DNA of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* has been blasted forward, like disassembled projectiles hurtling across the space of the pages.

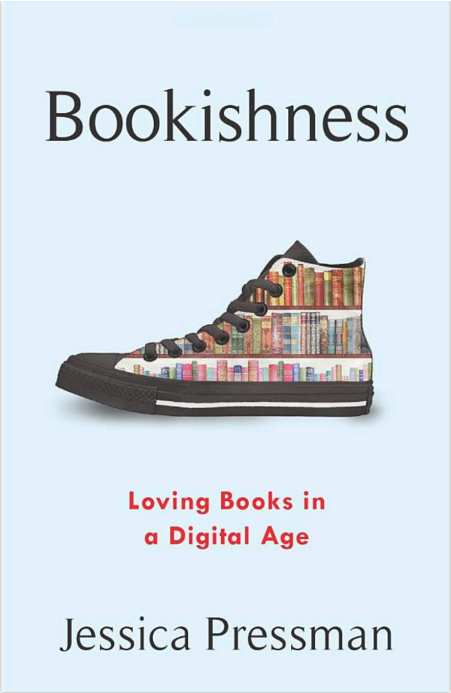
These sorts of commentaries provide the same flavor of disruption and intrigue imparted by the works they describe.

*Artists and Their Books / Books and Their Artists* is intended for a variety of audiences. It functions as a general introduction to the topic, as well as an overview anthology for a more academic crowd. Each plate is well documented and the index is complete. It does lack a bibliography, but that is an acceptable, and not unusual, absence for a catalog like this. The publication's most important gesture is that it blurs whatever lines may be conjured or constructed to separate books from "art" and art from "books." It left me wanting more (say twice the number of its 200 pages), and it presented me with an assortment of ingenious puzzles, questions, and mysteries to enjoy and muse upon. And isn't that what we love about books, art, and books as art? ■

## Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age

by Jessica Pressman
Columbia University Press, 2020 · 216 pages · ISBN 978-0231195133

*Reviewed by Peter O'Brien*




**THIS BOOK HAS ENOUGH** bookish meandering to be both insightful and frustrating. To begin with, I'm not really sure what Jessica Pressman, a professor of English at San Diego State University, means by the words "loving," "books," and "digital" in her subtitle.

She is, at least, clear about what "bookishness" means to her. She calls it a "twenty-first century phenomenon" which involves "creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical." That word "fetish" is woven throughout this book, from the first page to the last. Now I'm as fetishistic as the next person, but I couldn't dissociate the word "atavistic" (my word) from her invocation of "fetishistic." Although Pressman does take a brief look at a few pathways of the digital, her observations border on the confectionary, as in: If people put all their books on a Kindle, then how can we judge and form snap opinions of them?; and are "shelfies" (self-portraits with bookshelves) really just about posturing and yet more judging? Pressman doesn't really explore the digital in any significant way, and this book borders on the nostalgic, on longing; or, to use a word beloved by Pressman, this book is a 216-page "memorial."

Meant for an educated and inquisitive general audience, *Bookishness* explores a wide range of aesthetic and linguistic efforts, including wallpaper, sticky notes, and cell-phone covers, as well as more arcane and intellectual efforts, including a detailed discussion of *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer (a reconstruction, reconfiguring, and reimagining of *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz) and of *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* by Leanne Shapton (a bittersweet auction catalog / graphic novel that connects relationships with consumption and loss).

I found some of Pressman's commentary pointed and compelling. Talking about her personal library, she says she feels "that realness deep in my bones, underneath the point of criticism." She talks about how "the thingness of books" allows "a display of a person's learning, aspirations, and attachments—and so books are also a source of anxiety. . . . As a professional reader, books can be nasty things. They tease, taunt, and fester."

At other points, I found her observations facile:

> Bookishness turns our attention to the materiality of books so that we can appreciate the book as a thing whose thingness and thereness matter. . . . Bookishness illuminates the book to be a thing whose materiality matters in newfound ways.

Toward the end of the book, Pressman writes that bookishness "turns the book into an art of the present that archives and memorializes the past." I was surprised that she does not reference the future, which is, I think, what most books either do or attempt to do. I found myself wandering toward Laurence Sterne (surely his *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, from the mid-1700s, is one of the most bookish books ever written),

*Peter O'Brien is an independent writer and artist. In the last few months he published a novel,* The Meister Effect, *set in Chicago 2057 (exploring the electrical power generated by the brains of people with ADHD, PTSD, and OCD) and France 1327 (in the final days of the German mystic Meister Eckhart), and* Love & Let Go: Reflections, Confessions, Encouragements and a Few Cautionary Fore-warnings from a Father to a Daughter.

James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake* redefines the whole idea of the book, while being simultaneously steeped in how books are imagined and constructed), and Margaret Atwood (specifically her new fire-resistant, censorship-proof, single-book edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*). Each of these authors confronts the bookishness of their books (through words, stories, and in the case of the first two, graphic elements), and they each also capture the past, present, and future within their writerly travels.

I am always intrigued when writers and thinkers create a distinction between the analog and the digital. These days I read as much on a screen as I do on paper, and my 25-year-old daughter does the same. We both effortlessly move back and forth between these two technologies. (I reread *Moby Dick* on a small screen just because, and she is always surrounded by both paper-books and screen-books.) I believe that the digital mimics and invokes the way our brains and minds work much more than we are sometimes comfortable admitting.

It's accurate to say that our brains are simultaneously digital and analog. We depend upon individual synapses to spark, or spike, or turn on and off, which is the foundation of a digital appreciation of the world around us. And this specific on-off action has the potential to instantaneously occur, give or take, a quadrillion times in the average brain—here it's fair to compare this to an analog way of connecting with the multitudinous chimerical associations that the world presents us. We are both analog and digital, constantly sorting our way through the tangible and the intangible, the real and the artificial, the one and the many.

And if our contemporaneous (past, present, and future) technologies sometimes lead us toward sex, gossip, the frivolous, and the manipulative, well, those are perennial fascinations—Juvenal, Horace, and Martial, as well as George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Margaret Atwood, would agree.

*Bookishness* helped focus my attentions and sympathies on these and related wanderings. Brains and books, the analog and the digital, flourish because of forgeries, artifice, and imaginings. Unlike some others, I do not see us swallowed up by AI, NFTs, and URLs. I still like eating, sleeping, copulating. I go for walks, smell coffee, scratch my butt, floss my teeth, hug my daughter. Books, in whatever form they come to me, will continue to inform and delight. Without digital culture, I'd never really be able to fully explore medieval marginalia and the *Book of Kells*. I think my understanding of "bookishness" is different, and not quite so pining as Pressman's. ■