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# Show and Tell: Contemporary Practice in Artists' Books

by Sharon Butler

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This month over 138 international publishers, booksellers, and antiquarian dealers will stock their bookshelves at Printed Matter's annual fair for contemporary art books, art catalogs, artists' books, art periodicals, and zines. In addition, the Art Library Society of New York is hosting a four-day conference to examine contemporary directions in artists' books. Chances are, both the fair and the conference will be overwhelmingly successful. Although the printed book in general has suffered at the hands of the digital revolution, things haven't changed too much for lovers of art books. Not merely readers, they are aficionados, aesthetes of the printed page who cherish the touch and feel of ink on paper, and who can afford to cultivate their tastes. Collecting limited-edition books is far less expensive than collecting most other art forms. So even as the art market careens toward an inevitable "correction," the book fair is likely to prosper. Cheapness, however, is a relative concept. And traditionally, the artists' book has financially challenged not so much the collector as the artist.

Until recently, publishing options for artists, unless funded by dealers, publishers, grants, or trust funds, have been limited. In theory, book projects were aimed at bypassing the gallery system to the artist's economic advantage, but in practice, the need for outside funding simply added another gatekeeper. Artists who chose to finance the production of books on their own were limited in terms of print quality and print-run, both of which must be fairly high for stores specializing in artist books, like Printed Matter, to accept them for distribution.



Despite the innovations of on-demand publishing, some artists still like to bind books by hand at The Center for Book Arts.

Printed Matter, a non-profit organization founded in 1976 and dedicated to the promotion of books created by artists, requires at least 100 finished copies for its inventory, dummies and prototypes being unacceptable. Thus, independent artists who wanted Printed Matter to distribute their books either had to sink a lot of money into the effort (the minimum conventional print-run is often 500), or take on the arduous task of printing and binding the books themselves.

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Zines, with their low-tech, do-it-yourself aesthetic, can be affordably produced in large quantities. And indeed, Printed Matter embraces the zine option, as it is in line with the organization's mission to offer inexpensive editions of art books rather than labor-intensive, one-of-a-kind gems. But some artists want to recapture as much of their work's chromatic and textural glory as possible on the printed page, and that requires production values that zines cannot offer

But now artists have affordable options thanks to on-demand publishers like Blurb and Lulu. Blurb, founded in 2005 by amateur photographer Olivier Laurent, who was stymied in an attempt to publish a book of his photographs by the high cost and low quality offered by existing publishers. Laurent initially started Blurb to serve photographers like himself, but quickly—and inevitably, given the broad applicability of the technology—he moved the company into other areas. For instance, Blurb began creating books from blogs. Artists can download the Blurb page layout software, easily add text and images (or import blog posts) to the template, send the completed file to print electronically, and receive a bound book in the mail within ten days. The entire job may set the customer back as little as ten dollars (plus shipping). There's no minimum quantity, and once the artist approves the book, Blurb is willing to distribute it, too. The company has no commercial or practical need to keep a cumbersome inventory of printed books; it simply hangs on to the digital file and prints it out as orders come in. Artists announce the publications on their websites and blogs, or show samples at exhibitions; buyers purchase their books directly from Blurb's website. Last year Blurb printed over 90,000 books.

Lulu does business a little differently, but is driven by the same basic technological efficiencies. Founded in 2003 by entrepreneur Bob Young, Lulu defines itself not as a publisher but as “a digital marketplace,” and has over 1.2 million registered users. Artists can print book projects and set up their own “storefronts” through which they can sell their books and those created by other Lulu users. Like Blurb, Lulu enables artists to publish precisely as many (or as few) books as they need with no prepress fees or startup costs. Self-publishing, of course, has always existed for writers, but these new companies are geared toward artists' needs, which include high-quality full-color images an array of sizes and binding choices. If, for writers, self-publishing carries a stigma—the assumption being that anyone resorting to a “vanity house” can't be good enough get a “real publisher”—for visual artists it is a celebrated and integral part of their creative culture.

In my personal experience, on-demand publishing has radically changed how I approach exhibition documentation and writing projects. Before it was available, I curated an exhibition at a non-profit gallery with a \$500 budget from grant funding to create a catalogue or brochure. The possibilities afforded by that sum were extremely limited. I could have used the money to create a simple four-page color brochure (basically, one piece of paper printed on two sides and folded), or a black-and-white 24-page booklet with an essay, images of each work, and artists' biographies. I opted for the 24-page book on lightweight, glossy paper and saddle stitching (also known as “staples”). Although I only wanted 200 copies, the minimum order was a thousand. Ultimately, the little booklet, which went over budget, adequately documented the project. But

without color, the images suffered and the result was not terribly impressive. Today, even galleries with shoestring budgets can engage outfits like Blurb and Lulu to produce handsomely bound, full-color artists' books or catalogues to accompany each exhibition.

That said, on-demand publishing will probably never completely supplant limited-edition or one-of-a-kind art books. Last month, I visited The Center for Book Arts, which was established to preserve the traditional crafts of the handmade book, and chatted with James Copeland, its external affairs manager, about the Center's workshops. He attested to their popularity and the intensity of the artists' participation. These phenomena suggest that those intent on learning to use letterpress printers and bind books by hand may in fact be resisting the encroachment of digital technology on art practice. Copeland also surmised that the bookmaking process appealed to artists, particularly graphic designers, who yearned for something more substantial than bits and bytes. Interestingly, as more fine artists adopt digital tools like blogs and page layout software, designers are drawn in the other direction, towards limited-edition, handmade projects. These trends indicate that on-demand publishing will not render the more traditional crafts obsolete or passé, but both will coexist in some kind of equilibrium.

And there will always be room for the artists' book as a one-of-a-kind object, as demonstrated by the prolific Amy Wilson's current exhibition at BravinLee Programs. Unlike contemporary text artists such as Laurence Weiner and his followers, Wilson is more interested in the narrative use of language than in its semantic meaning. Her show features her usual cast of innocent, skinny-legged girls, all dressed in micro-minis, surrounded by handwritten text bubbles containing confessional outpourings about politics, art, science, and metaphysics. The thematic focus of the show, *The Myth of Loneliness*, is a fifteen-foot-long handmade pop-up book in which her penciled text snakes around three-dimensional paper buildings, trees, trains, and bridges. While reading it, I got the discomfiting feeling that I was inside Wilson's head, listening to her think. The text in one drawing revealed that when she was a child, she thought the constant activity humming in her brain was abnormal. In later passages we learn that as she grew up, she came to appreciate and indulge her mind's constant agitation, which is clearly evident in her text-rich drawings and books. All artists want to show, but some want to tell, too. Artists' books, in all their forms, let us do both.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sharon Butler maintains the blog *Two Coats of Paint*.