In the World of Digital, Print Raises A Challenge

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a review of
Urgent Publishing after the Artist's Book: Making Public Movements Toward Liberation by Paul Soulellis (Book Design: Be Oakley). GenderFail 2021

Urgent Publishing After the Artist's Book operates as a document, a record, an archival object and a piece of art, while the book's commentary on the arts, publishing, and social justice is expressed both through text and graphic design. It challenges the reader's role as viewer and consumer, potential ally and an unwitting antagonist.

Inspired by a streaming video presentation by Paul Soulellis during the Center for Book Arts' pandemic-restricted online 2021 conference, GenderFail's Brooklyn-based publisher, Be Oakley, has created an engaging limited-edition book that operates both as a companion piece to the recording of Soulellis's talk and as what they describe as an "urgent text."

Before proceeding further, let me lay out some brief definitions.

The Institute for Network Cultures coined the term urgent publishing in their 2019 publication *Here and Now? Explorations in Urgent Publishing* as a response to the question; "What kind of innovations can help to present information in a timely manner, without losing out on quality and relevance?" In other words, how can slow media requiring rigorous academic or journalistic research possibly compete with the immediacy and viral efficiency of Twitter?

Artists' books are books that have been conceived of as works of art or art objects in and of themselves, rather than as a document containing the writing or images of an artist. Without wandering out into Korzybskian conceptual territories, one could think of the category of artists' books as being generally produced in smaller editions for niche audiences, outside of the mainstream publishing industry.

During the online presentation, Soulellis, a scholar and experimental publisher from Providence, R.I., addressed an audience of book artists and book arts scholars, but his message may resonate with anyone involved in writing, art, and publishing, both of physical and digital media. Soulellis opens with some historical context, citing the feminist, artist and writer, Lucy Lippard, who envisioned a world where artists' books carrying messages of liberation would be available on supermarket shelves and not just niche bookstores.

Soulellis reflects that "Almost 50 years later, I think we can say that Lucy Lippard's vision of artists' books ensconced in supermarkets has finally arrived, although not in the form she anticipated. Today, rather than finding Heresies at the Stop 'n Shop, we download it and carry it with us while running our errands. We find artists getting the word out about feminism and race and politics there in our feeds. But this works so well not because the zines are for sale, but because we are. We are the product—or rather, our behavior and data are."

Soulellis reflects on the current state of the arts and artist publishing, using the example of book artist Lawrence Weiner's recent collaboration with fashion megalith Louis Vuitton to "plaster" his trademark political statements across trendy, high-dollar accessories.

In response, he offers a quote from Toronto-based organizer and artist Darian Razdar, who writes that "...subsuming radical practices into dominant structures perpetrates more harm than it reduces. Non-profits, museums,

cultural corporations, style magazines, chic developers, and governmental arts councils are all complicit (to varying degrees) in the exploitation of transgressive art for capital accumulation."

Soulellis suggests setting aside the definitions that restrict artist publishing to its current academic and institutional parameters and allow escape only through corporate branding. He proposes another route, via decentralized publishing platforms and mutual-aid publishing models, like the one established by Emory Douglas, the publisher of *The Black Panther*, the Party's newspaper in the 1960s. *Fifth Estate* is a long-running example of a successful anti-authoritarian mutual-aid publishing model.

Enter Be Oakley, whose GenderFail project fits well within Soulellis's new model. Even before Soulellis concluded his live talk, Be Oakley had already messaged Soulellis to propose a printed version of the talk. Soulellis agreed.

According to their website, GenderFail publishes "works that expand queer subjectivity by looking at queerness as an identity that challenges capitalist, racist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and anti-environmental ideologies."

Practicing a kind of radical transparency, Oakley publishes GenderFail's financial statements alongside its mission statement, and although there is a collective emphasis on the creative output, Oakley is obviously the driving force behind the project. They describe GenderFail's model as "...not non-for-profit but profit-for-survival or profit-to-continue-our-work-without-other-means-of-capital and most importantly to make money for others I publish."

This intentionally mangled verbiage reflects a frustration with the economic status quo all too familiar to anarchist publishers. One need only browse the *Fifth Estate's* online archives (fifthestate.org/archive) to find documentation of the long-running debate over for-profit publishing.

In 1978, the letters section of FE was ablaze with critiques of various radical publishing ventures who may or may not have "sold out" (FE Criticized & Our Response, John and Paula Zerzan, FE #291, April 30, 1978). That Soulellis and GenderFail continue the quest for a third way in the face of the techno-capitalist onslaught may be deemed futile by some, heroic by others.

Among their other projects, Be Oakley has produced a set of open-source digital fonts based on photographs of protest signs. Their protest fonts include "Say Their Names," "Black Trans Lives Matter," "Mother Nature is a Lesbian," and "Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries," in which the text of this book is set.

The book is a perfect-bound softcover, and a comfortable size to hold, an object similar to the size and weight of a tablet computer. The interior pages consist of Soulellis's presentation slides, reproduced along with a transcript of the talk, printed in alternating purple and orange on a risograph (the obsolete screen-printing machine favored by many of today's zine-makers.)

Upon opening the book, the reader is immediately assaulted visually by the bright colors and the rough, all-caps typesetting, and yet the pages are surprisingly easy to interact with. The low-definition presentation encourages a more focused experience than the YouTube video of the talk, where the distractions of advertising and temptation to click away are constantly in play. In fact, the book conveys the urgency of Soulellis's talk in a way that is equal to, even possibly surpassing, the talk itself.

As Urgent Publishing points out, we live in a media environment increasingly dominated by corporate marketing strategies in which social issues are only human resource problems and political polarization is a branding strategy. The work of Be Oakley and Paul Soulellis poses the question: how can printed matter be used, not to compete with the power of digital media, but to augment it in a way that re-engages users in real, physical, offline community?

In the wake of techno-utopianism's imploding digital dream, is print on paper once again our last, best hope for inspiring change?

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