

“A Challenge to Our Thinking Habits”

Contemporary Experimental American Poetry Through Small Press Publishing Practices

Hello and thank you to Faishol, AIFIS, UNY, particular people, Dr. Nurhadi

To begin –

Right now, there's lots and lots of poetry being written, published, and read in the United States. The variety and diversity of contemporary American poetry and publishing is enormous. Far too much to try to attempt to address in the amount of time we have today.

For this presentation, I'd like to focus on the world of poetry that I'm most involved in – the small press world of publishing poetry that's often called “experimental” or “non-commercial” or oftentimes just “difficult” or “weird.” However, this weird stuff, for me at least, only seems weird because it's whole point is to use language differently than we expect; to try to do things with language other than the average everyday language thing – in thinking about and reading poetry, I constantly ask myself: What is poetry and what's it supposed to do? Does it have a social function? If it does, what is that function? If it doesn't, why not? Does poetry need a social function?

Though I'm constantly coming up with new (and often conflicting) answers to these questions, and, for sure, there's no definite answer (and the best poetry is often aware that there's no definite answer for why and how it exists) for the purposes of this talk, we're going to imagine that poetry does have some kind of social function. Or, if it doesn't have a social function exactly, that it has an anti-function, that the form of uselessness or waste that it stands against functionality. Perhaps.

I'd like to start with a few quotes from poet and translator Rosmarie Waldrop. These quotes are from her essay “Alarms and Excursions,” which is available as a free PDF online, and I'd be happy to share the link with whoever is interested after the talk. My hope is that these quotes will provide some ways for us to think about the work of the publishers and poets that we're going to look at in more detail in a minute. Though, to be sure, none of these statements are definitive – they're notions, informed notions, but still just notions, ideas, conjectures:

“...poetry has social relevance. It is not just an ornament or just private, an expression of personal emotions. [Poetry's] relation to society is not just reflective or mimetic, not just articulating what oft was thought but never so well expressed. It can make the culture aware of itself, unveil hidden structures. It questions, resists. Hence it can at least potentially anticipate structures that might lead to social change.”

“...even if poetry were just expressing personal emotions, it would have a social function—namely, acknowledging the importance of the emotions even though (or because) they often hinder our smooth functioning within a social order.”

“The social function of poetry is pleasure...the kind of pleasure that is an enormous anarchic and subversive force, which is why societies...are suspicious of it and try to hard to regulate it.” [it being pleasure, not poetry]

“Subversion by pleasure does not at all fit our initial thesis of a more constructive critical role. But it

might well fit with the notion that writing and the writer do not really have a place under the social structure at all, but are outside it, opposite.”

“By its very nature of being 'other,' literature *cannot help being critical*, cannot help being 'an action against the inadequacy of human beings.' [Brecht's formulation].”

“Maybe our poems offer a challenge to the ruling grammar, offer some patterns of thinking and perception that might not be bad possibilities to consider. But [and here reality comes in] how many readers does a small press book reach? Even if all one thousand copies of a typical press run get sold, even if they all reach readers, how much effect is this going to have on society?”

A little small press background – the tradition in the US: modernist little magazines, mimeo revolution, small press movement beginning in 70s and blowing up in NY, CA, etc. in early 2000s. Poets publishing themselves and their friends' work using new (or old, but certainly) low-cost technologies (mimeo, xerox, letterpress). The poets, the writers themselves, controlling the means of production and distribution of their own work – unalienating the labor of writing and publishing it on their own terms, however small the economic gain.

Now, this kind of small press publishing is always what they call a “labor of love.” It's often one or two people or a group of friends or a collective, several people doing tons and tons of work for little to no pay and only in order to make publications of poetry and to get those publications into the hands of interested readers. So, right off the bat, a pretty foolhardy and obsessive enterprise. As Waldrop says in her essay: “...the whole small press world, rather than getting rich at the poets' expense, is like the poets engaged in wasting energy, time, money—wasting it beautifully. Why do they do it?”

for the poets and publishers i'm going to talk about, I think they do it because they believe, or at least are trying very very hard to actually believe, that poetry does something for people – as the conflicting notions in Waldrop's ideas show, we might not know what it does for people, but I think we believe that it does something – for me, at least in my thinking about it right now, poetry may be capable of expanding the possibilities of how language can be used and through expanding the possibilities for language, expanding the possibilities of can be imagined. And, hopefully, by expanding what can be imagined, poetry ultimately acts to expand the possibilities for compassion, meaning, and understanding in human relationships, be they internal, external, political, inter-personal, spiritual, environmental ...

Ok, so, now we're going to take a look at the particular activities of 5 small presses and the poetry that they publish. These presses are all part of the same world of “experimental,” non-commercial poetry; their modes of working and the content they publish is often subversive – it acts as a refusal or rejection of the dominant, hyper-capitalist modes of working and thinking in the United States.

My hope is that discussing the modes of publication – the design aesthetic of the books, the way they're produced, the way they're distributed, the way the publishers function — will illuminate our understanding of the poems themselves and that our discussion of the poems will contribute to an understanding of why and how the books are designed, produced, and distributed the way they are. It's important to note that my perspective is limited, and that these poems are often made with the intention of multiplying perspectives – so please feel free to disagree with me and form your opinions about how all this works.

The presses we'll focus on now are DoubleCross Press, Mondo Bummer Books, The New Heave-Ho,

Belladonna\* Collaborative, and Ugly Duckling Presse.

So, DoubleCross Press is a publisher of handmade books of poetry and poetics. With an eye toward artist book studio practices and spaces, and toward the materials and structures of contemporary and historic hand-bookmaking, [DoubleCross] produces physical manifestations of [their] writers' language. [They] publish poetry chapbooks, essays on book arts and book culture, poetry journals, and other materials exploring the boundaries of poetry, poetics, and artist books.

MC Hyland founded DoubleCross Press in 2008 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, as a student in the Book Arts and Creative Writing MFA programs at the University of Alabama. Later that year, MC and the press moved to the Minnesota Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis.

Bercerita tentang DoubleCross – MC and Jeff, Anna. The poetics and politics of the hand-made. The smallness of it. The artisanal, crafty dimension, the letterpress printing and hand-binding and the paper they use. Talk about submission process.

[Show images of Ada's book, Jennifer's book, then Zhou's book. Read poem from Zhou's book – talk about the poem]

Ok, so next I want to talk about Mondo Bummer Books.

Mondo Bummer is a chapbook press known for its DIY/punk/minimalist aesthetic. The traditional Mondo Bummer book is tri-folded and corner-stapled sheets of regular copy paper with a handwritten title. The idea is to make poetry chapbooks you can wipe your greasy pizza hands on and not feel bad about it.

Started in 2019 by Amy Berkowitz, a poet now living in San Francisco. Talk about the aesthetic of Mondo Bummer, in relation to the aesthetic of DoubleCross. The directness, the cheapness. Kind of a punk poetry publisher. What even makes these things books anyway?

[read “Catawampus” – talk about it]

Next – The New Heave-Ho. Similarly to Mondo Bummer, The New Heave-Ho is concerned with making poetry cheap and accessible. But The New Heave-Ho doesn't actually print books – their publishing platform is exclusively online. Started by poet Noel Black in 2013, The New Heave-Ho is a PDF press. I'm going to read you some of Noel's “Manifesto for the New PDF Press”

The new .PDF (Portable Document Format) press recognizes that poetry-as-text/manuscript will rarely, if ever, have any commercial value as such. The value of poetry-as-text/manuscript should not be confused with the value of books of poetry as visual and literary art objects, or the value of the ideas and thoughts of the poet herself. Because poetry-as-text/manuscript has no inherent commercial value, it can be, in all senses, free. The new .PDF Press seeks to make as much poetry free and available as possible to encourage the free exchange of ideas in poetry as widely as possible.

Online .PDF publication allows for instantaneous publication and distribution that puts complete creative and editorial control into the hands of the author, or author AND publisher, while recognizing the historic advantages of aesthetic, political and philosophical collectivism/affiliation that a “press” or imprint offers to a community of writers/artists and readers.

The new .PDF press also seeks to bypass the MFA/Phd. system as a gatekeeper/gentrifier of poetry culture and publication by making as many poems available to as many people as possible outside those gates. As such, the new .PDF press encourages amateurism and a more truly free exchange of poetry-as-manuscript/text. [we'll talk a little more about this gatekeeping/gentrifying of culture by academia a little later]

The new .PDF press offers all the advantages of the distribution model of digital media while retaining much of the aesthetic and economic impulse of the low-budget chapbook or zine press, particularly as it manifested itself in the “mimeo revolution” in the 1960s and 70s, the zine/xerox publications of the 1980s and 90s, and the hybrid letterpress/small press/internet publication revival of the 2000s. As such, the new .PDF press invites and encourages the person downloading texts to print and bind them in any way she see fit so that .PDF publications have as great a physical/archival distribution as possible. These downloaded and printed versions will eventually become useful and necessary archival artifacts of the new .PDF press, but are not its ultimate aim.

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So far, The New Heave-Ho has only published a few PDFs – the séance poetry of Abraham Adams, an essay about time by Marina Eckler, English-language translations of Spanish language poets Guillermo Rebolo-Gill and Mara Pastor.

[read Noel's poem – talk about it]

ok, so now we're going to talk about Belladonna\* Collaborative and Ugly Duckling Presse, two publishers who started off very small, publishing little chapbooks and hand-made objects and putting on readings and events in the 90's, and then grew to publish full-length perfect bound books that have become widely-recognized and important small presses for the world of contemporary poetry in the US. Both of these publishers are based in Brooklyn, NY. They also both work with collective or collaborative organizational structures, with many people working on various aspects of keeping the presses running. UDP and Belladonna are also both registered non-profit organizations and are community-oriented in their working practices – both put on a lot of readings, events, and discussions; produce special publications for these events; work with volunteers, interns ,and apprentices to whom they teach the skills involved small press publishing.

So, first let's talk about Belladonna a bit. I'll read to you from their mission statement:

Belladonna\* is a feminist avant-garde collective, founded in 1999 by Rachel Levitsky. Belladonna\* was started as a reading and salon series at Bluestocking's Women's Bookstore on New York City's Lower East Side. In June 2000, in collaboration with Boog Literature, Belladonna\* began to publish commemorative ‘chaplets’ of the readers’ work.

Belladonna's mission is to promote the work of women writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multicultural, multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable and dangerous with language. Belladonna\* has featured nearly 300 writers of wildly diverse age and origin, writers who work in conversation and collaboration, in and between multiple forms, languages, and critical fields. As performance and as printed text, the work collects,

gathers over time and space, forming a conversation about the feminist avant-garde, what it is and how it comes to be. Belladonna\* is committed to building publication and literary community between women writers who write off-center—poetry and prose that is political and critical, that is situational rather than plot-driven, that is inter-subjective or performative or witnessing rather than personally revelatory, that reaches across the boundaries and binaries of literary genre and artistic fields.

The organizational principle of the group allows for creativity to take leaps and meander rather than a top-down hierarchical structure. Instead of holding contests or having regular submission periods, they promote feminist literary community among those with a shared (and ever-evolving) poetics. For the most part they develop their reading series and publication list through affiliation and invitation. They work with poets with whom they are collectively in conversation; they look for new poets who are doing what they think is resonant and interventionist. In this manner the collective expands as new poets join the conversations, often volunteering to help with our projects. Anyone who feels aligned with what they are doing can participate, volunteer and contribute to what Belladonna is becoming. Writers who are published by Belladonna often participate in the process of publishing their work and the work of others, and then become involved in the collective.

[talk a little about the readings, the people involved. Read Foster and Diggs poems – talk about them]

“Poetry in fact rebukes definition, the definitive...The poem comes from knowledge of its origins and against it” — Tonya Foster re: Swam of Bees

“In my book *Twerk* you’re going to see a ton of influences, influences that are musical: house, hip-hop, dancehall, the gay ballroom scene. You’re also going to see this engagement and collision of languages, languages that are indigenous, taking over the English language. I want you to close the book and think about the possibilities of transformation, and the beauty of multiple languages dancing beside each other. — Latasha N. Nevada Diggs re: *Twerk*

Ok, so finally: Ugly Duckling Presse, the one of which i'm a part.

Let's start with our mission statement:

Ugly Duckling Presse is a nonprofit publisher for poetry, translation, experimental nonfiction, performance texts, and books by artists. UDP was transformed from a 1990s zine into a Brooklyn-based small press by a volunteer editorial collective that has published more than 200 titles to date. UDP favors emerging, international, and “forgotten” writers, and its books, chapbooks, artist’s books, broadsides, and periodicals often contain handmade elements, calling attention to the labor and history of bookmaking. UDP is committed to keeping its publications in circulation with our online archive of out-of-print chapbooks and our digital proofs program. In all of its activities, UDP endeavors to create an experience of art free of expectation, coercion, and utility.

Talk about the history a bit  
the ethos – volunteerism, collectivity, amateurism, non-commerciality  
the way we work and publish  
what we publish and why  
look at cover images

also, I brought several of our books, which are [indicate location]. So, after the talk, if you like, please feel free to take a look at them. And I also brought a bunch of postcards from our recent reading room

exhibition at the Yogyakartaarium, and a bunch of stickers, so please feel free to take some of those later.

[read Poirier poem – talk about it. Read Waters' poems – talk. Read White poem – talk]

“a type of innovative anachronistic lyric anarchist word blast.” — Julien’s description of the type of poems he likes. the kind of poems that “give the middle finger to the court.”

the deleterious influence of professionalism and academicization “that has temporarily blinded North American poets to the natural beauty of their hands.”

“It is a great joy to be a poet, and where the pencil meets the page, we’re all lovers—amateurs.” — the UDP ethos of amateurism, junior artists

“Poetry isn’t magical or removed from dirty, compromising political and personal acts, pettiness, racism, sexism, suffering. Absent the intervention of many other sociopolitical acts, poetry won’t save your life. To suggest otherwise is a kind of offense against poetry’s insistence on complexity, the multidimensionality of understanding. Taking it seriously as a carrier of information about the real matrix between language and power, which is truly upsetting — mind-blowing — when we come near to it, changes the way you live. Believe it.” — Simone White