

***Traditional and emerging formats of artist's books: where do we go from here?* The Centre for Fine Print Research (CFPR) at University of West of England in Bristol UK in July 2009.**

light-trap press: seeing projects from conception to publication and beyond.

Before I start just a reminder that this talk comes with a Poetry warning! If you would like to your way calmly to the exits...

Introduction

The original call for conference papers stated a belief that content is paramount for any artist's book, yet format is also part of its context...so this talk is a response to that relationship between content and format using my perspective as an artist, poet and publisher of *light-trap press*. I have a particular interest in the relationship between text and image both on the page and in the big picture of the finished work's relationship to the world at large. Light-trap publishes in the area of the relationship between text and image including collaborations between poets and printmakers with the intention of giving an equal weight to each practice; and in a variety of differing contexts and scales through printed, digital and performative media

I trained in Fine Art at Cardiff College of Art (now UWIC) and Queensland College of Art, I have work in public collections including The National Gallery of Australia, The National Library of Wales and some unpronounceable place in Turkey. But I have always read poetry (I was brought up in Wales where poetry is considered the highest art...though singing and rugby are up there) and I started writing poetry in 1999 and having my first book published in 2007. Publishing seems like the illogically logical progression from being both a practicing visual artist and a poet.

As a Roadmap in the talk we will:

- Consider 'why we create artists books'
- Look at the impact of working with text
- unpack as far as we can in the time, the two most recent light-trap press publications, *The Night Ladder* and *twelve labours* both funded by an Arts Queensland Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy grant (you will find them in the concurrent exhibition).
- Explore convergent practice and divergent presentation to take advantage of possibilities

And from that, hopefully, work out how the relationship between content and format influences the outcome.

So why do we create artists books?

For many reasons it seems and in many ways including because:

- A book is a tool to understand a problem, a place for the publisher/artist/poet to experiment and bring ideas together and look at them. And here I see artist's books, zines and multiples – part of artistic practice, a tool to understand a problem and so related to the intent of the project.
- creating a book, particularly a collaboration, creates a community, I think particularly of print folios but also the connections made with researchers, librarians and crafts people.
- we make artists books to make an object...and sometimes, or for some people, to not make an object (the artist and the art practice are the ultimate *object*)

Generally my thinking leads me to group the manifestations according to the possible reason for production. So *why* is an important question.

My first foray into words and image was to create an online poetry journal. I acted as graphic designer and poetry editor. The words had primacy because my design ethos was that the site should be quiet, without bells and whistles and should imitate the experience of reading from a page. The collaboration that continues this still ongoing online journal now includes another editor, reviewers, interviewees, photographers and web designers. Next year will be the seventh year which in internet journal terms is getting up there...

The next foray was postcard poems. Post art. The collaboration was between poets but the object was to collect these postcards into books, one of which was a collaboration between myself and the poet Jill Jones. Both the website and the postcards were part of poetic practice but obviously influenced by a training in Fine Art. It was the idea that was important and it was the words that came first. I think that influences the outcome. I find it particularly interesting and not too surprising that the postcards are in the collection of a library rather than a gallery¹.

Then there is Creating Artists Books as a tool to understand a problem

I just want to talk a little about three artist books that I created during my Churchill Fellowship in 2008. They are *Golwg*, *The World Turns* and *Pools of Light*. I didn't know I was considering a problem but I created these books one after the other and a year later had enough distance to realize they were differently hefted tools to think about the issue of migration and belonging. A long sequence of poems that I was working on also as I travelled (it was a very productive time) is very definitely a page poem and will be published by Shearsman soon. There the images are imagery not made visible by me with anything other than words. But in the artist books I was making, the text although there, is either more integrated or takes a back seat.

Golwg is a Unique Book of drawings in a Moleskine drawing book I used while in Wales. Conceptually it considers the difference between looking and seeing, textually at translation and personally at emigration (the translation of self from one place to another). I used pencil and wash for the drawings and the text, in Welsh and English, uses typewriter and rubber stamps. Being on the move I used typewriter and rubber stamp to produce variable and interesting text in a way that complements a

drawn pencil line or blot or wash of ink. By the time I had finished it, UWIC very kindly let me have time in the studio and I screen-printed the cover from some of the interior drawings. I am pleased to say that it is now in the collection of The National Library of Wales.

Now with some studio time I started the next book *the world turns*.

This is actually two sets of postcards and eleven letterpress and screenprint monoprints. The first set of postcards is as if sent to my childhood using digital and screenprint and a second set of postcards now framed and therefore no longer a book were created from multiple overlays of screen printed text and illustrations both from separate almost contemporaneous encyclopedias, the text detailing Captain Cook's voyage to Australia the other images of navigational instruments (he ostensibly set out to observe the transit of Venus mid ocean). In the eleven letterpress and screenprint monoprints the text of the same poem was repeated but only phrases were highlighted in ink while the rest of the poem was mutely blind embossed. Here is the poem:

the world turns from us
not from our feelings

though everyone's heart leaks

In the aeroplane
in pools of light
screens flutter mutely
and tell me nothing
not even that one small choice
they made

an announcement warns us to take care
contents may shift during flight

It is not hard to see that this was a personal series of work – there are no direct references to Australia but the navigational instruments make it onto the page.

The screenprint and digital was done at Cardiff College of Art UWIC and the letterpress an hour away here at the Centre for Fine Print Research. Screenprint, letterpress and digital are often used to create large editions but I was more interested in producing complexity in a one off.

The last book created during this time was **Pools of Light**

The content was developed from monoprints (letterpress and linoprint) again using the text of the same poem *The world turns* but photocopied in Black&White on heavy, coated paper, with quite different results. The text disappears into pools of light and then into darkness. Again, like letterpress and other

printmaking techniques, photocopy is capable of almost infinitely re-production but the edition size is two, one of which is in the collection of Centre for Fine Print Research.

None of these books has an isbn, but they have been 'published' in that they have been sent out into the world of exhibitions or collections to make their own way. Creating a work is thinking out loud in this case on questions of identity and belonging as a migrant and the relationship between text and image – which for me may actually be the same question. The thinking was visual as the works moved between text and image.

Then there is the idea of **Creating Artists Books to create a community**

This idea of creating community has had a great deal of influence over choosing collaborators and that most important of relationships, those between artists and their work and the independent yet mutual role between artist and poet in collaborative projects.

The collaborations that became the Night Ladder project came about almost by accident. The poem *The twelve labours*, written after what I thought I was going to write (something worthy about lighthouses) became a shipwreck and I turned for light relief to classical antiquity, is a little dark and disturbing. When I was approached by a young and way too uncomplicated artist who works in a figurative style around the notion of a journey it that got me thinking: if I did want to work with someone who would it be.

Brisbane has a strong group of around 140 printmakers: Impress Printmakers Studio, of which I am a member and my two collaborators on the Night Ladder project Gwenn Tasker and Lisa Pullen are also, so I was familiar with their work.

Gwenn an artist printmaker specializing in etchings and Fremantle Print prize finalist created a series of images based on twelve twisted tasks of Herakles. I won't read you anything from that book as it is one long poem but you should be able to read it for yourself in the exhibition. The letterpress and wood type was printed by me.

I was also writing a series of dark poems from the fairy tales of Charles Perrault. (Obviously I do dark!) I found an original French version and laboriously and with some license started to translate them. There are by the way, eleven of these tales, but the fact that I don't actually speak French meant that I couldn't make head nor tail of some of the stories once I had translated them and it led to only five making it into the series. Just in case you think that not speaking French was a drawback – I loved what my exceedingly dodgy translations uncovered!

Lisa Pullen, an artist printmaker specializing in lino cuts, and Silkcut finalist, created a series of images based on the following poems: Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Bluebeard and Clattermouth while I set and printed the letterpress text. The book is entitled *The Night Ladder*. Three of the five poems have now also been published in an anthology from Cinnamon Press here in the UK this year. This one is called:

Bluebeard

Paler than death I made her sign
and she dying with fear and temptation
so ugly and so terrible

God rents Sunday afternoons
the house trembles for a moment
beautiful and afflicted

A small moment and not a moment more
though she may go everywhere but may not enter
- that key is just withdrawn from the door

While I walk like a sailor over a deck
that is a live and curdled thing
slick with the slow slosh of the bilges

Anne, my sister Anne, don't you see anything coming?
Anne, my sister Anne, don't you see anything coming?

Why is there blood on this key?

As an act of faith Lisa, Gwenn and I booked a gallery in Melbourne to show, what at that point, were early artists proofs from the Night Ladder and twelve labours collaborations. The subsequent result makes good the idea that money (in the form of a grant) follows passion. The grant funding gave us an incredible advantageⁱⁱ in that we could afford to make the books with one of the very best bookbinders in Australia, Fred Pohlmann. The making of the books became a meeting point between crafts people and artists as we learnt what was required of us to make good our intentions.

At the same moment as this we were actually also launching the first light-trap press print media publication: *holding Job's hand*. This had been commercially printed and the idea of book launches at exhibitions got started.

When I heard Louise Waller read her poem **holding Job's hand** exploring identity, loss and hope I wanted to publish it. I hadn't published anything apart from the online journal foam:e before but I found myself persuading printmaker and performance artist Clyde McGill, past winner of the Libris Book Awards who I knew had an interest in poetry, to collaborate. And when he said yes I realized I would actually have to get it typeset, find a commercial printer who could be persuaded to bind rather less than exactly torn edges of an edition of photopolymer etched prints as the cover. That's the problem with ideas they run away with themselves....and I suppose you could just leave it there but well I can't.

Text nowadays can be produced in a variety of ways depending on the required aesthetic, economic considerations and desired print-run. With a print-run of only 50 and very few local places to print letterpress we opted for digital printing:

- as it is relatively easy to prepare text
- though it produces flat planographic look
- and although we didn't use archival paper and ink we did choose a recycled paper partly for the softer colour (stark white was not the required aesthetic).

The next project to create the two artist's books: *The Night Ladder* and *twelve labours*, each in an edition of 25, was beyond our means but we really wanted to do it in that rich fine press way and then get out there to show the work. It was a challenge to us in many ways, me because I really am not interested in creating editions but I wanted to understand traditional livre d'artiste and I understand by seeing and doing. For Gwenn it may have been the challenge of working in a more figurative way in order to create visual narrative and for Lisa making personal someone else's storyline. The books were a tool to understand our different problems. So this was the main reason we applied for the joint Federal and State initiative Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy Grant managed by Arts Queensland for *The Night Ladder* and *twelve labours*, to challenge ourselves and to understand things. The idea was running before we knew it. We had to use the grantors words and their criteria in writing the grant and when it comes time to acquit it we better not have forgotten what we promised. But the fact that we can get a grantor to give us the means to work on our artistic questions is liberating to all of our practices.

Creating Artists Books to make an object

With **holding Job's hand**, **twelve labours** and **The Night Ladder** there was always going to be an ISBN...because we wanted the books capable of being found. It also can mean statutory deposit, though with low edition artist books that is not always the case. In Australia statutory deposit means the National Library of Australia and the State Library...in my case The State Library of Queensland that houses one of the most important collections of artists books in the southern hemisphere. Written into the grant was time in the Conservation Lab where I went behind the scenes to be taught how to use the Pragnant Titling machine and hand tools by John Blindell.

For the Night Ladder I chose to add silver blocking foil to the Clattermouth page. It might be worth reading Clattermouth at this point so you can see what I was trying to achieve:

Clattermouth

Two sisters the elder is her mother's spit
 the younger as plausible as her father's image
 stays out late with strangers

Always though her excuses fall
 sweet as diamonds sweet as pearls

Until their mother says
You'll take your sister next time Miss La-di-dah
we'd be set for life if we had your gift!

But the next stranger rewards the elder's honesty
in different coin

to him her words leave her mouth as snakes
as rusted metal traps

I'll make that sister pay the elder rages
I'll scold her 'til she chokes on jewels

Her clattering words warn the younger to run away
She'll take a bus to the city and meet a man
who'll recognise her worth

the instant that she opens her mouth

The good girl speaks well...or is it the plain speaking girl we should really trust. What does good mean? This is a story about being marriageable ...and where do we see silver blocking foil nowadays but on wedding stationery. I deliberately used the alphabet..not the pppp's and qqq's we are expected to mind but the ohs and the vees to create the diamonds and pearls...the metaphorical jewels of a young ladies speech. The use of text in this way as part of the visual narrative reiterates the story.

Here are some images of the folio pages from *The Night Ladder* being shown recently at the Australian National University's Book Studio.

The Livre deluxe tradition came out of poetry and print collaborations. A traditional book is an object but also the sum of very prescribed parts and these books conform to that tradition. The cover, the title page, the dedication each influence the final look of the book... But as a specific example we will look at text in relation to *The Night Ladder* and *twelve labours*:

The Text

Because time was so short for actually printing the text of the books a lot of the layout and typeface was planned beforehand. The structure had less opportunity to be organic or evolve – there was a deadline and deadlines necessitate outcomes. So for instance the typeface of *The Night Ladder* titles was set out in the mock-ups as Charlemagne – when I actually got to choose the typeface I had to work with the available type but the Albertus gave a similar look and the titles were placed as already envisaged. The first of the titles was set out and Little Red Ridinghood was chosen because of its length. If we could fit

Little Red Riding Hood in the Albertus across the page then we wouldn't have any trouble with any of the other shorter titles. In fact there was more than enough room and the lead type was given extra air with kerning. The titles weren't broken but reserved and all were assembled as the contents page. (and here are the titles lined up while I typeset one of the poems.

The architecture of both books was quite simple with the Night Ladder poems hanging their variable length from a fixed horizon line near the top, bookended by the title in capitals giving weight to the bottom of the page with a variable gap between the bottom of the poem and the title. There is nothing like typesetting to highlight your use of language. I don't use rhyming but instead a lot of repetition and alliteration to create rhythm. There were some poems where I almost ran out of W's and A's.

Here are some of the preparatory ink drawings by Lisa Pullen and the finished printed image bedside it.

The twelve labours had a low fixed horizon line formed by wood type. I used **The Wood Type** to highlight the contrast with the perfection of photopolymer type. Type was created for mass production and interrupting the organized mechanized text created by moveable type is one way to subvert that and instead create monoprints, one-off works, to not create an edition. I saw the roman numerals as a pattern that could be set out once in a block and played around with in the inking up to create the numbering of each poem. The un-numbered pages at the beginning of the book are blind embossed. Having this area of monoprinting made the strictures of an edition interesting for me, the messy but controlled wipeback added an organic energy to the page. They had purpose and meaning but revealed in a more abstract quality than the rest of the text.

I am very grateful to Caren Florance at The Australian National University (ANU) School of Art, Book Studio who helped me deal with leading and picas. I have the advantage of being able to read upside down and backwards but there are some aspects of letterpress that don't sit as well with my rather more experimental personality. When asked she said "some people plan their work absolutely down to the last fold & leave no room for change (and get very stressed if things go wrong!); others start with an idea and see what happens as they go along. It's a real personality thing, no rhyme or reason. I guess it also depends if the 'vision' of an idea is abstract or solid in your head -- my fine press books were absolutely real all along, even though the cover designs changed a bit at the end. But my other books are always experimental and very unformed in my head -- I just get a thematic idea and play until it seems real."

So maybe it comes down to personality or available time or the need for outcomes. Additionally which came first the poetry or the image could influence the result

Try and work out the relationship between content and format particularly through legibility and meaning

In 2008 while on the Churchill Fellowship to investigate small press print/poetry collaborations I took every opportunity to also see art exhibitions and attend, and in one instance give, a poetry reading. I was there in New York at the publication of two broadsheets and in San Francisco produced one myself ***Stop the Car***. Two of the exhibitions in particular reminded me again that books are not necessarily all made of paper, bound within covers but include tablets, scrolls and folding screens, slideshows and objects within containers. They were *Drama and Desire: Japanese Paintings from the Floating World 1690–1850* at The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and *From East to West* at the British Library in London. The Handscrolls in the San Francisco exhibition were treated as books to be brought out and enjoyed intimately, then put away,¹ possibly because of the fugitive nature of the inks or possibly due to their erotic content.

As a writer I agree with the words that make up Mel Bochner's 1970 painting "Language is not transparent" not particularly because that work juxtaposes the truth that words are arbitrary signs by using the physicality of paint, but because meaning is not fixed. After all paint can be paint or it can represent skin, stars, landscape just as words can be satisfying nonsense or 'perfect' sense. Both methods of conveying meaning are arbitrary and mutable. As an example here are two of my poems side by side... 'The Mircle Drug' and 'Stop the Car' which is taken from my second book *Views of the Hudson* soon to be published by Shearsman. In one the language used to evade computer spam filter software is employed in a way that is difficult to read but makes perfect sense; in the other language is as spoken and yet possibly more opaque. Both are perfectly legible. The medium of the page poem as published commercially by University of Queensland Press aims to be neutral and transparent. For the broadsheet that I printed in the studio at the San Francisco Centre for the Book, the quirkyness of the hand set type adds something of rhythm and urgency in a graphic way to the subject of the poem.

I asked the artist Nicci Haynes, who recently won the Swan Hill drawing prize, about legibility. She chooses to work from the text of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* precisely because it is considered by many as virtually unreadable. When speaking about a work that uses the entire text of the book compressed by the possibilities of digital manipulation onto just one page, she jokes "It retains all the legibility of Joyce's original at only a fraction of the size". In her more serious comments on her work with *Finnegans Wake* she says "I don't have much to say about legibility but I do have something to say about the ambiguity of language."

Ad Reinhardt said in 1966 "Words in art are words. Letters in art are letters. Writing in art is writing." And I don't think we can get away from words remaining as words but I do think that legibility plays a

¹ "Japanese ukiyo-e paintings were executed on paper and silk using mineral pigments with a glue binder for paints and carbon from soot for inks. Fragile and sensitive to light, they were not meant for permanent display. Screens and hanging scrolls were shown only at specific times of the year. Handscrolls were treated as books to be brought out and enjoyed intimately, then put away. www.asianart.org February 15–May 4, 2008

part in deciding whether we judge the image created by an artist from words as “words...letters...writing” or whether a different set of rules can be overlaid where the graphic possibilities start to over ride and the ‘meaning’ starts to be derived from a visual rather than a literal narrative. To return to Nicci Haynes this book *Excerpts from Finnegans Wake*ⁱⁱⁱ, takes excerpts printed by letterpress and frottage from polymer plate on dyed paper, as fragmented passages fading in and out of the visual field. Its unintelligibility in a literal rather visual way fascinates me.²

In my Unique Book: **My Dear Nellie** I am interested in writing as a visual language, writing of course is personal and gestural. In this work I used someone else’s words: a found postcard for the cover, gold paint over purple ink handwriting on cream card, and the laser printed concertina folded pages explore the graphic qualities of the handwriting and the elusiveness of communication. As in Nicci Haynes work what I was trying to say did not need legibility to say it.

Legibility appears to be a sliding scale between the literal and visual that influences a work.

Here as an example of something that appeals to modern sensibilities is something not published by light-trap press (I wish it were): an autograph letter by John Milton.

Explore how convergence of practices and divergence of presentation may influence content and format and how we can actually take advantage of its possibilities

By convergence the bringing together of interests and by divergence I mean not limiting the possibilities of Publication and Performance of the artists book through creating a website with web designers, or a project that requires a commercial printer, or with traditional bookbinders and always we work with galleries and libraries. Possibilities are created from the overlap of media, with book launches and poetry readings taking place in galleries; and exhibitions timed to coincide with literary.

I’m going to show you some of Gwenn’s images from the book *twelve labours* to show an entity with many manifestations:

- The poem was written. In my take on the labours of Hercules there is RITUAL, a STALKER, a GRUESOME FRATRICIDE and the EXCISION OF A HORN FROM A BULL...not much different from the original.
 - Gwenn Tasker started from the text of the poem to create her own narrative into a visual language that she owns.
 - Our thoughts and passion for the project were then reinterpreted into the formal language of a grant application that responds to assessment criteria.
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- I presented the poem and Gwenn's artists proofs in a talk at the International Conference *Poetic Myth* held at The University of Melbourne 2 & 3 October 2008 where it became a multimedia experience as the books themselves were hardly started.
- and together or rather apart in separate studios with letterpress and etching presses we printed the book entitled twelve labours.
- From that have come further Exhibitions – at Llanfyllin (I love saying that), Umbrella Studios, Townsville in Far North Queensland and possibly Redlands which is Bayside in Brisbane also in Queensland.
- Images from the book have now featured in advertisements for the commercial printer who printed the exhibition invitation cards.
- There will be Poetry readings using the book at Artist Book Fairs
- a website was written into the proposal... and acts as part of the documentation
- And briefly it lives in this talk (though somewhere down a corridor the book itself glows)

So what's the relationship between content and format? Have I reached a conclusion?

- The things that we create lead complex lives! They should not be pinned down.
- Why we want to make them creates the context of the relationship between content and format
- Why? Because a book is a tool to understand a problem
- i.e. it is idea rich and full of intent
- it is capable of bringing people together
- this object called a book has its own context (tradition) of fixed elements that resist rearrangement
- just because the form resists doesn't mean we should capitulate
- text in particular persists as something to be read even when we work against legibility to turn it into a visual language
- And the separation of the written and the drawn, the word and image which after all are processed in different and distinct parts of our brains actually give rise to possibilities for combinations in terms of format

Possible future projects light-trap press

- A Folio approach to Print and Poetry possibly for the tenth anniversary of foam:e (hopefully we'll get there)

- another collaboration in 2010: **how to form clouds in another's blood**. Original print cover by artist Julie Barrett. Poem sequence commercially printed from digital by multi-award winning poet Nathan Shepherdson in an Edition of 50 signed by both artist and author.
- And after a big project like *The Night Ladder* and *twelve labours* that has almost consumed the lives of the collaborators for nearly a year I personally am looking forward to doing some drawing and creating one-off books possibly based on handwriting.

I will conclude by showing you the next work at the intersection of text and image, in which light-trap press has collaborated with ArtBunker using a composition that references architecture and sculptural space by artist Ian Friend. This is the third collaboration between us, the image onscreen formed part of an commemorative exhibition catalogue for Ian Friend's 30 year Retrospective "*On Paper*".

In this collaboration the image came first and the poem *when I leave the clouds*, was written specifically for this proposal. The words partly follow, and partly digress from, the underlying image, creating juncture and disjuncture, allowing the eye to meander and flow across the surface. While the poem has been liberated from textual convention, it maintains coherence through the logical placement of English text, read conventionally across from left to right. Do I regard this as an artists book – yes^{iv} but to judge for yourself you will have to drive down Kelvin Grove Road in inner city Brisbane. Don't worry you won't miss it: at almost 50 metres wide it is Australia's largest public artspace and is seen by 700k commuters daily.

when I leave the clouds

through a window sky
 opens gets lost closes
 unravels fitful gusts of cinema
 or nothingness
 infinity always escapes this radar
 this attempt to order the celestial
 and when I leave the clouds
the stars look very cold about the sky^v

Finally a thank you to my collaborators particularly Gwenn Tasker and Lisa Pullen, Arts Queensland for the VACS grant, the State Library of Queensland's Senior conservator Lydia Egunnike, Impress Printmaker's Studio, Queensland College of Art, ANU Book Studio, Art Bunker and bookbinder Fred Pohlmann.

ⁱ Fryer Library University of Queensland

ⁱⁱⁱ *Running a press isn't something you get into without thinking. Making books by hand is time consuming and incredibly expensive. Then you have no idea if you are going to sell any^j.*

Richard Clarke, of Knife edge Press quoted in *Printmaking Today* *Printmaking Today* Vol 17 No. 1 Spring 2008 (UK)

ⁱⁱⁱ Images and further description of the book in question can be found at:

<http://artistbooks.ning.com/profile/niccihaynes>

^{iv} Alex Selenitsch writing in *Australian Artists Books* defined it simply as “ **An artists book is a book made by an artist, and is meant as an artwork.**”

^v last line is quoted from a letter by Keats