

The Handmade Tale: Book Arts in the Dystopian Present

JON BATH of the University of Saskatchewan interviewed three practitioners of the book arts and found that the traditional and the digital can complement each other.

The past century was one of great change, one that swept away established notions of all sorts and pushed the world to wonder if anything could ever remain the same again. The atomic age itself, placing people under the apocalyptic shadow cast by the mushroom cloud, entrenched a deep existential angst that gradually lifted with the end of the Cold War but was not soon forgotten.

Other technologies, too, made people question whether things could continue as they had. I remember my grandmother saying in the early 1970s that postage stamps, which I had begun to collect, were nearing an end. They haven't ended yet, but the clerk at the post office finds it simpler to affix metered postage to my parcels. Debit cards and e-wallets are ushering in a cashless society, and cheques are falling out of fashion. How long before polymer banknotes (no longer paper) disappear, too?

The book arts, however, seem to have struck a balance between the analog and the digital realms. It's an uneasy accommodation, but hardly apocalyptic or even dystopian. Jon Bath, an assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan and director of the university's Digital Research Centre, teased out some of what the present looks like when he spoke with three printers and book artists in Vancouver last October following the presentation of the annual Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. Representing a broad range of practices, they included Sylvana D'Angelo, a Vancouver-based artist and designer and the driving force behind Zine Club; Erica Wilk of Moniker Press, a risograph print and publishing studio in Vancouver; and Mike Hepher, a former digital designer and now proprietor of Clawhammer Press in Fernie. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.

—Peter Mitham, editor



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Jon Bath. (Peter Mitham photo)

JON BATH: Kim got out of printing because there was no money left in printing in the 1980s. Technology changed and the work needed far fewer people than it did before. Print shops could also handle larger jobs, so for a guy like Kim living in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, his print jobs were getting farmed out first to shops in Saskatoon, then to shops in Winnipeg, then to shops in Toronto. So he saw no future for himself as a printer and decided to open a bike shop. That could be the start of a dystopian tale about how printing died in Canada.

Or we can look at the experience of my friend Paul. Paul got himself a set of instructions. It sounded like a quest for Nazi gold on some South Pacific Island, except that it was in rural Manitoba. Paul followed these instructions to the end of a gravel road, to a bush, and in that bush he found a pallet with three tons of lead type where someone had thrown it away. There was no longer any need for lead type and it wasn't worth the cost to sell it for salvage. It just got dumped in the bush. And Paul filled the back of his station wagon with that lead type and dragged his

muffler off as he drove out of the bush and thankfully, now, was actually able to set up a print shop at the University of Manitoba, thanks to that unlucky yet lucky discovery in the bush.

And then there was the Internet and the e-reader, and at every stage these have been threats to the book, and we could say the book would die, and it would lead to this dystopian world that we live in, and it would be an easy tale to write.

But that's not the tale we're going to tell, because the book arts have not died, and while some aspects of printing as a trade have died, and indeed large print shops that used to employ hundreds can now be run with two to three people, there are people still doing exciting things in the book arts, whether it's traditional printing or not.

JB: Why printing? Why books? What is it that draws you to spend your time, your career to get other people involved in the making of books? What is it about the printed object?

Erica: After I graduated from my BFA, I got stuck doing a lot of freelance design, video and Web work. I began to get tired of staring at a screen all day, which in turn attracted me to making more things with my hands. I love the tactility of books, and playing with the interaction people can have with an art object.

Mike: Our culture these days is coming to undervalue the tactile bits of our lives. Most of our furniture and our kitchen cupboard and our countertops and our flooring are like wood printed on something. It's not real. Over time we start to crave authentic experiences, whether it's a coffee table or a book.

You can read [a book] on a Kobo reader or on an e-reader of some kind, but you're actually missing the experience of touching a thing and turning the page, of hearing the paper go whoosh, of feeling the texture of a quality dust jacket—all those things are just absent in the digital experience. We're getting to be in a spot where lots of industries undervalue that subconscious experience as a valuable part of experiencing anything—not just books, but lots of different things, to the point where it's unusual to experience them sometimes.

I set up my studio in a place where people can come in and see the equipment that I'm working on while they're looking at paper products. It was a strange experience. They'll come in and pick up something, whether it's a greeting card or a coaster or a block print. They'll be handling it and you can see these tumblers fall into place in their mind. It's so unusual that they actually sense it with their fingers first, and their fingers are their first experience that this is different. And so their reading a book, to me, is more than just the words, it's the experience of reading. The quality of the book itself tells the quality of what's inside.



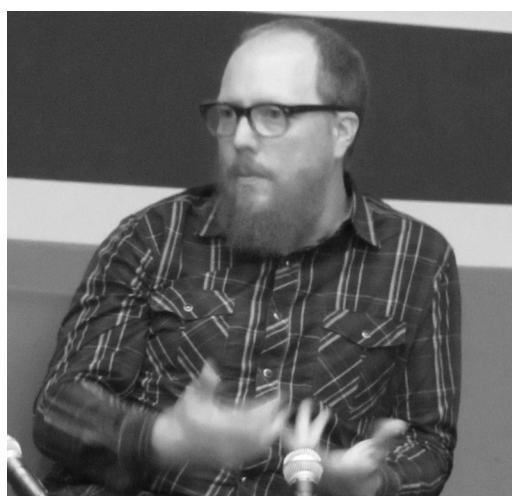
Jon Bath, far left, moderates a discussion of contemporary printing practices with (left to right) Mike Hepher, Erica Wilk and Sylvana D'Angelo. (Peter Mitham photo)

Sylvana: Personally, print is an option. It's something we can choose to do or not to do. I think about how I want to share the information itself, and if it would make sense to have a print project or if I want to use a website to share the information. I agree about the tactile feeling of holding something, and that importance you get from printing a thing out, but I also take into consideration how these ideas are going to be presented.

My most recent project is a website where you can't really see the contents unless you print it, so the experience is kind of joined together. You would have to print the project from the Web to see the full thing. So in an instance like that, it's great to have something tactile to hold, but the interesting thing about the project is that it is not just engaging print as a medium to share work, it is working with print as a concept.

JB: None of you are really traditional letterpress printers—you're not printing chapbooks and poetry, you're doing mostly posters. For you, Erica, you actually use a weird in-between printing technology, which is the risograph.

Erica: Yes, true. Someone actually asked me at a book fair recently if the risograph process was analog or digital, and at first I couldn't quite figure out how to answer. In short, I said it has elements



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Mike Hepher, Clawhammer Press.

of both. You can choose to make a drawing or collage by hand, and use the scanning bed to create an image, or you can work digitally for the entire process. However, because the machine makes something similar to a plate or stencil, it could technically be considered analog printing.

JB: One of the things I find really interesting as I talk to book workers across Canada is that even people who you would expect to be traditionalists are somehow influenced by digital technologies. It might be just a step back from digital. . . It's curious how they mix things together, say, the use of polymer plates created from digital files, or the use of social media for marketing.

Sylvana: I try to approach social media, specifically things like Tumblr, as perhaps a zine itself, and think about updates and articles that would make a form, or would work together to create an idea. Marketing is one thing, but a lot of people [who are] part of Zine Club are international, and we communicate mostly over Gmail. So after a couple of years of working together, we still had to admit how big an impact social media had on just simply connecting us. I don't know if that makes too much sense other than that [by] working with it so much, it just becomes an entity of its own. It really shapes the way that you make your ideas, because if you're forming something for Web and you're creating it together on the Web, it sort of develops a specific tone.

Erica: I have nothing against e-books. Generally, I find I can concentrate better on reading when I have an object in my hand, and like I mentioned before, I enjoy the tactility of the book as an object. I am interested in how digital texts or the medium of books could be played with. I think Sylvana does an especially good job of interplaying the two, with some of her Zine Club projects and Web-based publications.

Mike: There's a real strong place for digital and fast, and there's a real strong place for analog as well, and there's not a lot in between. Because I worked as a digital designer for many years, I'm

using [digital] at various spots in my production process. With my final product, the actual printed piece, what I'm often doing is printing a good, historic type and then scanning it again and then making a photo-polymer plate and then printing it again on a letterpress for some piece of work, so it's often cycling back and forth through the digital realm several times, or I'm doing a pencil sketch, scanning it in, experimenting with layers of type, and then doing a graphic transfer onto a carbon block then transferring it back onto the computer and using it almost as an album cover illustration, so it becomes an illustration tool ultimately. The end product is almost always a hand-held piece, but the computer is certainly integrated in there in lots of different ways. That's not every letterpress person's experience, but I certainly see a lot of value in it and couldn't do what I do without that relation.

JB: Even people that like to make beautiful books still need to eat. One of the things that you have to understand with printers is that generally, they also want to make money. So how important is the digital to your business side of being a printer?

Mike: Digital, if we're talking about social media and communications, is critical from two perspectives. One of them is getting the word out there. There's starting to be a really young movement of letterpress printers in the Calgary area, which is technically closer to where I am. Most of the people who come and take workshops from me received their education at Alberta College of Art and Design. Initially, for me, [digital media] was a way of letting people know that I was there. It is also a way of finding community.

When you live in a small town and do a thing that's pretty strange in urban Canada, doing it in a small town is even more isolating. So finding other printers out there has been a lifeline to just seeing what other people are doing, not feeling like a weirdo, understanding that there are lots of different ways to do something, seeing new ideas, being inspired and asking questions like, "What are you doing there?" Digital streaming both ways is a really critical resource to have.



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*Erica Wilk of Moniker Press, left,
listens to Sylvana D'Angelo of Zine Club.*

Erica: I utilize digital technology—mostly various softwares [such as] Photoshop, InDesign—in almost every part of the process of making a risograph book or print. Social media is also a way of connecting to a community, especially for a risograph printer. There's not very many printers in Vancouver. But online it's so easy to enter a question in an online forum and someone, somewhere, will answer it. There's a large artistic risograph community around the world and the Internet allows us to connect with each other.

Sylvana: I'm really interested in long-distance collaboration and how we build bridges. . . . I'm always trying to think of a digital project, how we can make this interesting, more like print, how we can interact with it. I think that's important, and I think we need to bring those sensibilities from print more into the digital world. How are we going to make digital feel as good as holding a publication?

Erica: Despite digital printing being an option, people are still drawn to texture and uniqueness in alternative printing techniques such as risograph or letterpress, perhaps to make their work or company stand out. In recent years we've seen a revival of both letterpress and risograph printing. It's trendy, but also maybe reflects the need people have for interaction with objects— a rebellion against the digital, so to speak.

Mike: I think one of the trends, and maybe it's always been there but it's a catchword now, is the idea of a story. What I'm really trying to do is blur the lines between an ephemeral poster, for instance, and a numbered edition print. I do work for a place called Island Lake Lodge, which is a cat-skiing operation, and they had a branded beer bottle, so I did a beer label design which was actually a print. Now that print is a series we've done that people are starting to collect, and so there's a story that the client can tell to sell this really limited availability thing that has a sense of being made. It's a crafted thing, and that's why I think print at some level has more of a story, and people want to be part of that story at some level.

JB: What's your advice to someone who wants to hand-make books?

Sylvana: Produce something often, and to make sure it's something you're excited about doing. Really, my practice came from trial and error, and it was both important for how I developed ideas and how I developed being creative. Do lots, do lots; do it often, do what you want to do.

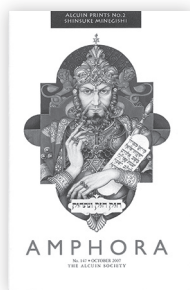
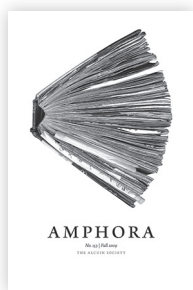
Erica: Start simple and small—you don't need tons of expensive equipment to make a

book. Go to the library, experiment using a photocopier, play around, fold paper. It doesn't need to be an edition of 1,000 to start.

Mike: Start on a scale that's attainable but also make sure the passion is there, make sure that it's along the lines of something you really want to do, because if you don't, it will become very tedious very quickly. I think all these different things that we're doing are passion-driven. Digital design paid about \$95 an hour in rural B.C. When I got the printing press and started actually doing something that's way more uncommon, my rates went down to about \$35 an hour. It's much harder to make a living, so you actually need the passion, you need to love it—every part of it.

There's a lot of bookkeeping—not my favourite part—there's things that you need to do, but as long as there are things you're passionate about 80 percent of the time, that will sustain you.

Erica: And with the other 20 percent, have other hobbies so you don't get burnt out and sad. It definitely helps to be passionate and love what you do, but it's also important to find other things outside of work that you love to do. It's essentially about achieving a healthy balance in life, which is way easier said than done.



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