

The Harmonious Cosmos of Fahrner & Fahrner

MARKUS FAHRNER celebrates 30 years of design, illustration and extraordinary bookmaking in a presentation delivered at CODEX 2011.

Introduced by MARLENE CHAN



Crowds checking out the books at CODEX 2011.

THE BIENNIAL CODEX INTERNATIONAL Book Fair & Symposium in Berkeley, California, is a book lover's paradise. This year's fair, with the theme "Borders and Collaborations," showcased an overwhelming range of artists' books from February 6 to 9. The sun-filled days heightened the experience for those of us from Canada, some of whom arrived having barely escaped major midwinter snowstorms.

Yet despite the myriad books on display, the days were well balanced. The serious symposium presentations in the morning were followed by the free-for-all frenzy of the fair in the afternoons. The first presentation, by Jan and Crispin Elsted of Mission, B.C.'s Barbarian Press, discussed the production of a lesser-known play by William Shakespeare, *The Play of Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Attendees were privileged to be able to marry an understanding of the long and painstaking

process of bookmaking with the joy of seeing and actually turning the pages of the finished work at the press's kiosk in the afternoon. There was a palpable collective heartbeat that gained momentum the closer we were able to get to the actual object.

Other speakers were equally engaging, providing a glimpse inside various aspects of the vast world of books, past, present and future. They included Richard Ovenden, keeper of special collections and associate director of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, whose talk was titled "Book Arts in the 21st Century Research Library." Paul van Capelleveen, curator of modern collections at Museum Meermanno in The Hague, discussed "friends and enemies" of contemporary Dutch fine books. Martha Hellion, an artist and independent curator from Mexico City, addressed the place of the artist's book in Latin and South America. Also on the agenda

were the master printer Juan Nicanor Pascoe of Mexico, Caroline Saltzwedel of Germany's Hirundo Press, and Mikail and Marina of M.K. Publishers in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Alcuin Society's own Markus Fahrner of Fahrner & Fahrner (Vancouver, Frankfurt am Main) also presented at the symposium. An edited version of his remarks follows.

PRESENTING AT CODEX, I felt it would be important to address those aspects of the craft that are not immediately obvious. Fahrner & Fahrner books are constantly searching for new ideas. It is very important for us to create new content. Our artist books are the product of our way of life, involving a philosophy of always being open to new impressions, of embracing that which triggers our creative mind.

Fahrner & Fahrner have been making books for some 30 years. Our small press involves my mother, Barbara Fahrner, and my wife, Fitnat Fahrner, as well as additional collaborators, whether it be in the design, writing, printing, binding or illustration aspects of the production. In recent years, I have collaborated on a book titled *Travelot* with my daughter Alicia.

Barbara has written many books about plants, her favourite being the nettle. Fungi in general fascinate her, especially the mushroom. The mushroom is a passion that she shared and discussed with John Cage while making their book *Nods*, published by Granary Press, New York.

Our works have been acquired by a variety of libraries and collections, ranging from the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, to Stanford University, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum in Den Haag. They have been exhibited at the prestigious Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany and venues in other countries, such as England and Switzerland.

For us, a book, or text, is about the appreciation of both the message and the techniques that serve the message. If it is done well, the techniques of making the book, the letters, the layout will all disappear. Instead, they together create their own harmonious cosmos. The book as such then becomes invisible as the reader peruses the message. In this way, the

thought or idea to be communicated acquires or loses force, directness, clearness, lucidity, beauty, in proportion to the fitness of the typography and layout employed as a medium

The creative process is twofold: one element is the research; the other is more spontaneous, expressing the simple pleasure of wanting to draw, sketch and paint. It is important for us to develop the art of observation, of deliberately watching and observing. It is this need to observe and research which feeds and makes necessary the expression and creation of new and found texts and images.

Producing our books requires constant note taking, research and reading. A visual spark often ignites a project. Anything can be an idea for a book. It is essential to have an open mind. Once the idea has formed, it is time to begin the research. This is the fascinating part about engaging in a book project. In each book's microcosm the macrocosm unfolds.

The research does not stop at the intellectual level. The fascinating part of making a book is the relationship between the content and the material world of the book. Certain contents demand certain typefaces and layout. Suddenly the end product jumps out from the world of ideas and makes its debut in a concrete display evidenced through paper, book dimensions, production and binding techniques. Sometimes these projects evolve over many years. They have to ripen and mature.

Since I work to such a large extent on my computer, the beauty of book production for me is when my texts and designs spill over into the physical world. It is important to walk at times outside the boundary of the book itself to find new ideas.

How do we express or transform our research into books or broadsheet? In our case the idea dictates much of the project's physical form. Our methods have included typewriter, handwritten, stamped, laser, offset and digitally printed books.

For example, it was Barbara's idea to "find" the lost encyclopedia from Borges' story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In creating the encyclopedia for the Tlön Project, we did not want to be entrapped by the codex form of a book, as we believed this would not be true to the artistic



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Dr. Yosef Wosk (left) chats with Markus Fahrner (right) at CODEX 2011 [left]; Tara Bryan of Newfoundland's Walking Bird Press was among the presses from Canada attending CODEX 2011 [right]

expression behind the “encyclopedic” notion. Thus, the physical structure ranged from folders that contained individual books, broadsheets and single sheets to tiny word fragments in a cloth sack. Moreover, by giving the collector the chance to reorder the individual books, we made it possible to have a strict alphabetic arrangement yet at the same time allowed for freedom from an imposed form of organization.

The text becomes attracted to and finds its own images. I enjoy taking photographs to illustrate my ideas or manipulating the pictures that I have taken or drawn, allowing them in turn to create new stories. I love how images can interact with text, creating new sublayers of meaning. I regard my own books as transportable tools that serve to explain the world. It allows me to play with different materials and push the boundaries between different types of media.

My latest book, *Hell box the book*, speaks to the fascination with the machine. The computer keys embody the physical aspect of production while transmitting the ideas contained in the book. The idea is transported by the craft. Paradoxically, this book communicates the idea that books are very rugged, portable and seductively tactile in

a way which no electronic device can replicate.

Over the years, we have added illustrations, drawings and collages as well as photography to the mix. The texts we use are either original texts written by us or they are the result of much research. Old botanical texts are juxtaposed in such a way as to create new and surprising aspects. Our books are driven by a hunger to explore new realms of being, creating a large library of our mind in ever-increasing volumes.

I love the physical aspect of the book. Not to mention the smell of a good book! The fascination of a book is that once it has been produced it takes on its own form of existence. Its sheer physical presence in the world makes it a force with spatial effect. The book reaches out of the present into the future. It speaks of ideas as much as it tells a tale of craftsmanship and of creating art.

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 ~ Marlene Chan is a contributing editor of *Amphora*. She lives in Montreal. Learn more about Fahrner & Fahrner literature, book art and paintings at www.fahrnerandfahrner.com. See more of Markus Fahrner’s work at Laughing Eye Design, www.fahrnerandfahrner.com/laughingeye/