

# Channeling Brodsky

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Master Printer PETER KOCH recounts his serendipitous adventures publishing Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark* in the city for which it was written.

IN DECEMBER 1972, two or so years before printer, publisher and writer Peter Koch had established Black Stone Press, his first independent printing press, poet laureate and essayist Joseph Brodsky travelled to Venice for the first time. From that date forward Brodsky visited the city on a semi-regular basis, usually in the wintertime, and in 1992, 20 years later, Noonday Press published *Watermark*, his work, which pays homage to the fog-drenched, misty, transient vistas that are Venice in the winter.

While Brodsky presented his affection for Venice through a series of lyrical reflections, Peter Koch did so by reprinting Brodsky's *Watermark* in the city for which it was written. After meeting his current wife, Susan Filter, Peter Koch also grew to love Venice, and in 2005 finalized his plans to print *Watermark* as an artist-in-residence of the Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venezia and the Emily Harvey Foundation.

In March, Peter Koch recounted his Venice printing adventure to a Vancouver audience through two free lectures presented by the Society. His lectures included a warm introduction by fellow printer Robert Bringhurst [see page 3], who, like many others, spoke highly of Koch and his achievements. Along with holding the title of Master Printer at San Francisco State University, Koch is the creator and co-founder of over four private presses, the most current being his Peter Koch, Printers. In addition, Koch recently co-founded the CODEX Foundation with Susan Filter, a foundation meant to promote the arts of the book, and as Bringhurst tells us he is "the only printer on the planet who has, in our lifetimes, commissioned a new Greek

text type, which was cut by hand in steel."

*Watermark* published by Peter Koch, Printers, includes 14 photogravures made from the original photographs of Robert Morgan, the American painter and long-time resident of Venice to whom Brodsky dedicated the original version. Susan Filter, along with friend and stonecutter Christopher Stinehour, created the book's very own watermark. Koch printed the type for *Watermark* in Venice on a press borrowed from the Tipoteca Italiana Fondazione [typeface and printing] museum, located in the small town of Curnuda, in the Treviso province about an hour north of Venice, and bound the book in his California studio with papers made by hand at Cave Papers in Minneapolis.

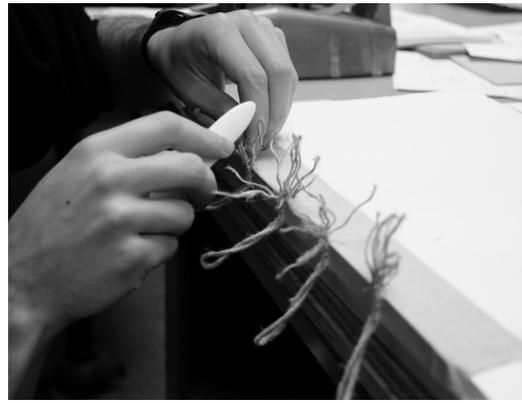
At his first Vancouver lecture, on March 25 at the SFU Downtown Campus, Peter Koch spoke of his 2006 trip to Venice (a lecture he titled "Printing in the Shadows of Aldus") alongside photographs taken during the venture. Here is just a snippet of the lecture he gave.

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~ Emma Jensen

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WHEN SUSAN FILTER AND I met 10 years ago I started spending an enormous amount of time in Venice, Italy, because she would take me there over and over and over again. By the time she took me the last time (in 2005) she was insisting that I print something by Joseph Brodsky, a very good friend of hers. I had resisted and resisted and resisted, not for any real reason but just because I had not read anything by Joseph Brodsky. She said, "Well, you've got to read *Watermark*. It takes place in Venice, we are going



Crispin Elsted of Barbarian Press composes type for Peter Koch's edition of *Watermark* (left), copies of which were meticulously bound by hand (right). Photos courtesy of Peter Koch.

to Venice, why don't you read this before we go?"

Susan then started thinking out loud: "Peter, why don't we print Brodsky's *Watermark* in Venice?"

I thought she was out of her mind. I said, "You have got to be kidding. That's a lot of work. And one, we don't have a printing press in Venice. Two, we don't have a house in Venice. And, three, we don't have a studio in Venice. And we don't have permission to print the book."

But Susan started in her way by contacting the Brodsky Trust and asking if we could reproduce this book and they said, "Sure."

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So we are in Venice the next time, in the Tipoteca Italiana, a really wonderful fine museum of printing machinery and monotype tools. We're in a conversation with the director there and I say to this fellow, "Wouldn't it be nice if I could print a book called *Watermark* in Venice? That's one of my visions."

He said, "Oh, why don't you print it here at our perfectly equipped museum?"

I said, "I don't want to print it in your beautiful museum. I want to print it in Venice."

"OK, no problem. I'll just bring you a press, any press in my museum, to Venice for you. If you want."

I say, "Oh. OK."

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That night we're back in Venice at a friend of Susan's, in her palace on the Grand Canal, and we

say, "Oh, isn't this nice, we've been offered a printing press but we don't have a studio to put it in."

She said, "Oh, why don't you go visit my cousin? She has an art school, maybe she'll give you some room."

So, the next day we go and visit her cousin and she says, "Oh yeah, how long would you like to have a studio here?"

"Well, I don't know... two, three months."

"Oh, fine. When do you want to come?"

I said, "Next fall."

"OK."

So I had a studio.

That next night we go to dinner with a friend of Susan's. We say, "Oh, you can't believe what happened: we have everything but an apartment."

She says, "Oh, how long would you like to stay?"

And at the end of that evening she had us an apartment not just for ourselves, but for some of our help also (several apartments).

So that's the story and that's how it all starts.

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In order for us to do this book, the first thing we figured was we had to have some handmade paper to make it with. I contacted the Twinrocker [Handmade Paper] mill in Brookston, Indiana, gave them a watermark that we wanted to be in the book.

The sheets were shipped to Oakland, California, where Magnolia mills and studios [Magnolia Editions] create the illustrations. The illustrations are from the photographs but they

are made from photogravures. Photogravures are a very difficult process, and there were no negatives for these photogravures so using the digital process, we scanned the photographs, created negatives, and sent the negatives to an expert plate maker, who made the plate. A second photograph was registered, in reverse, to the back of what is printed so that when you see the two pictures through the light you see one image and it reads like a watermark. The reason we went to do that is insane because it not only doubled the fun but it also doubled the mistakes. We had to print twice as much as we thought we needed to.

We had asked Robert Morgan, who currently has a studio in the northern part of Dorsoduro, if he'd be willing to share with us some of his photographs of Venice to use as illustrations in the book and he said he'd be delighted.

We soon land in Venice; the next day we get up and we drive out to the Tipoteca Italiana and inspect the press. The next morning our friend, in his boat, pulls up and says, "Get in the boat. Get in the boat, the presses have landed."

I had been waiting for this for two years and I'm fretted about it: Is the sun going to shine? Will the presses be there when I get there? Will they have already taken them? Will I get my ride on the Grand Canal? I mean the whole point of this was to get a ride on the Grand Canal [jocular tone], in my own boat, with my own team, with my own printing press, on my way to my own studio.

Now, we had to go under the Rialto Bridge, and we bribed the man who owns the boat to drive us down the canal and do a U-turn after we went under the bridge. The bribe was that we had to buy his whole crew drinks. So the whole crew was gone, on-shore, drinking, and the captain was driving us up the canal.

The next morning, I'm off to work just like normal. I'm setting up the studio. I start unpacking the material and with a great big, handsome knife I whack the heck out of my finger and have to go to the hospital. This was the same day we started unwrapping the type and getting it ready for Crispin Elsted and his wife Jan, who were going to help us compose the book.

We had ordered the type for our book from an Olivieri type foundry in Milano. It came in

these old shell boxes that looked like they had been through the First and Second World War. It turned out the gentleman who was supposed to correct this type had gone on vacation for the entire month of August. So we had to reconfigure the type for the next three weeks.

The inspiration for the typography of this book clearly was Aldus Manutius and his Aldine Press. I spent a lot of time thinking about the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* ever since I first discovered it. I pull it out once a year in my classes and show it to everybody. I like the dirty pictures. Everything about it is just a piece of work, not to mention its really obscure and interesting and quite deviant text.

Month two we pass out of the typesetting phase. In the second month we print the book.

The last thing that a printer prints usually prints in a book is the title page, saving the fun for last. When the book is completely printed it's time to throw out the type. Susan, who is a bit of a romantic, says, "We can't just throw them in the shell box and burn them."

So she shouts at me, "Peter. Peter, bring the camera, bring the camera."

She pulls out of the colophon page all the names of everybody: Robert Morgan, Susan Filter, Jan and Crispin Elsten, Jonathan Gerken, Russell Maret, Christopher Stinehour, Karen Bleitz—endless, these names. She looks both ways to see that no one is looking and then proceeds to dump these names in the canal. She gives us a little canal burial.

We got to the end of the book and Crispin Elsted was invited to shape the final paragraph, to whatever shape he wanted, and the last paragraph of this book is enough to break your heart, it is one of the most beautiful pieces of Brodsky's prose that I can think of. It is about a tear, it's about time, it's about loss, and about beauty.

At the very end, up in the apartment, Bob Morgan signs the colophon pages before we take them back to America. I kiss Venice goodbye in a wine glass and that's the end of the story. ☞

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~ For more of this lecture visit <http://blip.tv/file/3398469>. For information on Koch's Watermark visit his Web site: [www.peterkochprinters.com](http://www.peterkochprinters.com).