

BOOKSELLING

Fine presses and the bookseller

THE RECENT CODEX Foundation book arts festival and symposium “The Fate of the Art: The Hand Printed Book in the 21st Century,” or Kochfest as I like to call it, was by all accounts a highpoint for the fine press community. It provided a well-deserved spark to all who attended and participated, being the most significant event for the trade in many many years. (The reports from CODEX starting on page 15 in this issue will give you a taste of the proceedings.) So it’s particularly unfortunate that the relationship between 21st-century hand-printed books and the bookseller didn’t make the agenda.

According to its mission statement, the CODEX Foundation recognizes that “the importance of educating the marketplace must not be underestimated” and furthermore states, “Now, more than ever, the fine arts of the book need patronage and strategic support in order to thrive.” Yet not one bookseller was included in the formal program of the three-day symposium.

One would suspect that aside from the personal gratification derived from the creation and completion of a work, the ultimate success for a book artist or fine press publisher would be in the placement or sale of the entire edition of the work. It is never a bad sign when there are no more left.

Yet in the current scheme of things many artists and publishers are still looking at books from editions they created years ago. And many times the whole edition was 125 copies or less! Copies are sold to the handful of libraries and special collections that collect their work, and then what? (Mind you, the librarians are somewhat complicit in this problem too. In what other areas do they buy new material directly from publishers?)

No matter what the subject matter, surely there have to be 100 or so people in the world with an interest in the book.

Why is it so difficult for fine press printers and publishers to sell their work? One of the reasons is the disconnect between the fine press printers and book artists and the bookseller.

Booksellers are in the business of selling books, yet most fine press printers and book artists have yet to make this an easy proposition for booksellers. Most fine press printers and book artists are determined to be the publisher,

printer and distributor of their work. In no other facet of the book world does this occur. Not that the other facets of the book world aren’t dysfunctional as well, but none try to be the be all and end all.

Here are some of the roadblocks I have experienced in working with the fine press and book arts communities:

As much as we want to help, oftentimes not enough of a discount is offered to make buying these books a worthwhile pursuit for the bookseller. (Many dealers will require 50 percent.)

The retail asking price of the book is prohibitive.

Publishers are unwilling to consign material.

The price of the book may be raised as the inventory diminishes.

I am in no way minimizing the amount of work and effort that goes into producing these beautiful works. Everyone in the trade is underpaid, but until a better, more successful distribution system is devised for the fine press and book arts world, it is the booksellers who will offer the most exposure, especially ones with an open shop where the chance of exposing someone new to the work is greatest.

And why are fine press books only sold for the most part by the antiquarian booksellers? There are many opportunities in the new-book world that need to be explored. With a little collective education and outreach, the new-book selling community could be the next major marketplace for the fine press and artist’s book.

It is our responsibility as book artists, printers, booksellers, librarians and, more importantly, as people who love and cherish the book as an object of beauty to make certain we are doing all we can to work together to further our cause. We cannot let, to quote the CODEX Foundation, the “time-honored traditions . . . and with them the skills and disciplines that are necessary to ensure the survival of the hand-produced book” disappear under our watch.

*Michael Lieberman is a partner in Wessel & Lieberman Booksellers in Seattle, WA (www.wlbooks.com). He posts a daily book-related blog called *Book Patrol* (www.bookpatrol.net).*

JOIN IN

Any members in the Vancouver area interested in serving on the Alcuin Society’s board are invited to contact Ralph Stanton (ralph.stanton@ubc.ca) for further details.