

Small Publishers Fair 2004  
Fri 22nd - Sat 23rd October 2004

The Independent Bookcase  
Les Coleman, September 2004

Like any minority activity if it is to maintain a profile and survive, it has to set up its own networks. The outcrop of Artist's Book Fairs over the last ten years is a perfect example. Both in Britain and on the continent many of these have become annual events. It is usual that they last two or three days. Once you get over the sense of being at a bring and buy sale, these occasions offer a showcase for the weird and wonderful, the obscure and the impenetrable in print, from small presses and self publishers. Like any jumble sale, there are gems to be found for the serious punter prepared to scour the stands. Amongst the collectors and the informed there are always a small number of visitors for whom it is the first time, often uncertain and hesitant. Most stands are run by the creators and producers of the publications on display and part of the pleasure in browsing is talking to the artists and writers responsible.

With mainstream publishing allowing market forces to dominate what it is prepared to take on board, it has inevitably become increasingly cautious. Distribution is invariably pre-ordained with the bookshop chains, so it is virtually impossible for small, alternative publishers to infiltrate high street outlets. Even when a shop likes a book, it can become difficult to get them to stock it because it will "mess up our paperwork and be complicated to re-order". Often these books will come in irregular formats, be printed in small editions and fall outside of established categories. This has the capacity to confuse the bookshop manager as to where they should be displayed. Essentially, they are books positioned outside commercial business interests, so it is not surprising that their visibility is low.

Some of this material does filter into the broader art world through anthologies focused on small press publishing and artist produced books or monographs devoted to more established artists whose practice includes book works, such as Edward Ruscha, Sol Le Witt, Lawrence Weiner and Ian Hamilton Finlay.

The best fair, in my opinion, is the Small Publishers Fair ([www.rgap.co.uk](http://www.rgap.co.uk)), about to go into its third year, organised by Martin Rogers of RGAP. What separates this from other book fairs is its consistent programme of events around the book, establishing a historical overview of activity. As well as an exhibition, talks and readings are always part of what is on offer. This year's featured exhibition plus a talk, is from the New York based publishers Granary Books ([www.granarybooks.com](http://www.granarybooks.com)) set up in 1982 by Steve Clay. "While publishing books of great literary, social and aesthetic value, Granary also convinces of the necessity of the book's centrality as a cultural artifact."\* Stands are reasonable and the Small Publishers Fair is selective, excluding colleges who often take stands to promote their book art courses, in an attempt to maintain a standard of practice. Among those reading this year are the poets Alec Finlay, John Seed and Kyle Schlessinger

of Cuneiform Press, Buffalo. It is a non-profit making venture and fosters a great deal of goodwill from its contributors.

A comparable fair, attracting international participants, organised by Didier Mathieu, director of the Centre des Livres d' Artistes ([www.cdla.info/](http://www.cdla.info/)) is a bi-annual event taking place in Saint-Yrieix-La-Perche, France. The London Artist's Book Fair run by Marcus Campbell, ([www.marcuscampbell.co.uk](http://www.marcuscampbell.co.uk)) the first fair to get going in the capital, is by far the largest of the fairs with a diverse range of material. It appears to have lost any real direction, rapidly becoming the Bayswater Railings of artists' books. This does not mean it is without interest but my main complaint is the extortionate price of stands, further exacerbated by their limited dimensions, making it hard to justify participation for those producing work at the cheaper end of the market. It means that some artists who adopt a deliberate policy of low budget production as part of a polemical stance become further marginalised.

Two other established book events are Wexford Artist's Book Exhibition ([www.wexfordartistsbook.com](http://www.wexfordartistsbook.com)) and Halifax International Contemporary Artist's Book Fair ([www.contemporaryartistsbooks.com](http://www.contemporaryartistsbooks.com) and [www.deanclough.com](http://www.deanclough.com)). Both are well organised, publicised and attended, with the price of stands at Halifax being very reasonable. Most of the fairs produce catalogues containing essays, artists' statements and general information relevant to those taking part.

The act of publishing, however limited, is to engage an audience, and fairs are a way of creating a specialised platform. There are a number of colleges and university departments with library collections, with the Hyman Kreitman Research Centre at the Tate Britain library and Chelsea College of Art and Design having the most comprehensive archives. Both of these collections are available to the public by appointment.

A limited number of bookshops specialise in small press publishing. Some of the best known ones are: Printed Matter ([www.printedmatter.org](http://www.printedmatter.org)) in New York, Art Metropole ([www.artmetropole.com](http://www.artmetropole.com)) in Toronto, Boekie Woekie ([www.boekiewoekie.com](http://www.boekiewoekie.com)) in Amsterdam and bookartbookshop([www.bookartbookshop.com](http://www.bookartbookshop.com)) in London.

\*Oyster Boy Review ([www.oysterboyreview.com](http://www.oysterboyreview.com))