

Art in America



PUBLISH TO FLOURISH

Spanning print and digital forms, contemporary art publishing is a newly vital creative field with a rich history.

IT HAS BECOME a fall ritual in New York: tens of thousands of people venture to Printed Matter's art book fair at the end of September to peruse the wares of hundreds of small presses, independent artists, antiquarian dealers and zine makers. Though the looming death of print has been lamented in the traditional media for years, publishing in all forms appears to be thriving in the art world. From our vantage, the new possibilities afforded by digital media appear less like a threat to older print practices (which continue to attract collectors and artists alike) than like a complement to them, opening new possibilities for expanding the definitions of "book" or "magazine" while offering new platforms for circulating contemporary art, poetry, fiction and criticism. In an art market that can seem overheated and cutthroat, the relatively inexpensive and often collaborative nature of publishing offers something of a respite, a forum that fosters creative experimentation and (potentially) supports strong ethical positions free of commercial pressure.

Of course, publishing has always been fertile ground for artists. Obscure modernists could be propelled into the spotlight by a well-designed and bombastically worded manifesto. Avant-garde journals linked artists around the world while archiving imagery and practices that found little purchase within the cultural establishment. And even the mundane aspects of publishing could serve to shore up artis-

tic identities, as Colby Chamberlain's discussion of Fluxus elsewhere in this issue suggests. At the same time, the tools of publishing and its conventions of typography and design continue to inspire work made for display in galleries. Here, *Art in America* brings together six artists, writers, editors and publishers on the creative forefront of publishing today to discuss new developments in this growing field.

—Eds.,

KAY ROSEN

Artist

I have often been unwittingly, but not unwillingly, associated with graphic design, a label that surprises me because of my professional limitations in this area. The extent of my formal training in the field was a small job in the early '80s at a weekly newspaper, and the lessons I learned there were less about design practice *per se* than about the power of published text. There were no computers; I set type on a Headliner or phototypesetting machine, which printed out the text on a paper strip that was then applied to the layout using hot wax. (Don't laugh.) Although I had been using text in my artwork before then, it was with little knowledge of type fonts. As unsophisticated as that job was, the weekly imperative to publish opened up the world of type to me. It also revealed other graphic strategies, like justified margins, which led me to reorganize content via unnatural line breaks throughout the '80s, a strategy for uncovering new, but clear, meaning. I was so enamored with my typographic discoveries that I concurrently created a body of work—with an accompanying self-published artist book (*Lines On Lines*, 1983), followed the next year by a second book, titled *Mined* (but not published until 28 years later, by Helga Maria Klosterfelde Edition, Berlin)—using all of my newly discovered skills and fonts. The acquaintance with typography was an important addition to my language practice. I had left academia because I felt that some of the most interesting things going on in language needed to be expressed visually, and I had already applied materiality to text through scale, materials and color, but with my introduction to typography, the potential exploded.

However, the linguist in me wanted meaning to be carried by the structure of the words, not type style; the inner painter insisted that color convey meaning; the sculptor in me obsessed about the construction of letterforms through materials and process; and any poetic instincts strove for efficiency. To accommodate, I began to favor minimal, bold, sans serif fonts like Futura, Gill Sans and an off-brand rogue font called Commador. I explored the more functional aspects of letters



that would support these aspects of my practice and came to appreciate their generic forms, their *body parts* as writer and artist Rhonda Lieberman called them: ascenders; descenders; crossbars; rounded, curved and diagonal strokes; horizontal and/or vertical symmetry (O's, H's); and uppercase versus lowercase shapes. Type still counted, but there was balance.

I love that I can count on type to be professional and live up to its promise to always look the same. Visual consistency gives text authority—which is the fundamental lesson I learned at my publishing day job. Even a handwriting font has a certain formality that gives it authority, because every time you type a letter, no matter how casual it is, it will look the same. Although my paintings and drawings are handmade, the mechanical production of the template provides a reliable armature. Letters provide the architecture of written language. Type helps them succeed.

Kay Rosen: *Hi*,
1997/2012, latex
paint on wall,
dimensions
variable; at the
Contemporary Art
Museum, Raleigh.