The Breaker in the Pen

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Over the last 50 years, a major shift has occurred in the conception and production of print media, and we have seen its dominant cultural position diminished by electronic communication technologies and the social networks that have emerged in its immensely visual, post-literate wake. During that time there have been episodic debates about each stage of new media that, in large part, revive discussions that have been underway since the continuous European tradition of literate culture took shape in the 5th Century BCE.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), Marshall McLuhan argued that significant changes in the technological environment sooner or later would generate massive cultural transformations that would, among other things, permanently alter the form and function of the book. McLuhan did not talk or write specifically about “the art of the book” as an emerging field of study and practice. But his probing remarks such as “the new technology turns the old technology into an art form” and “information overload leads to pattern recognition” helped me realize—through the university classes on letterpress printing and arts of the book courses I have offered since 1978—how effects of the mediated environment may have allowed the book form to upgrade its status as a work of art.
Aside from his elliptical style and confrontational syntax, McLuhan provided a reasonable response to one central question in this field: “Why are so many young people interested in letterpress printing and in making books by hand?” The persistence of letterpress printing and the emergence of artist books can be explained in many ways, but one has to do with our desire for tactility. Tactility primarily involves the sense of touch, but it is the common-sense meeting place of all of the senses. We learn through the fingers and hands in ways we cannot investigate otherwise. When we work with our hands, we bring together materials and ideas. It is as if we can touch words, visual impressions, and feelings. Language is our primary medium for describing both our experiences of the world and our refusal to accept its terms. Out of necessity, printing by hand slows down our highly mediated lives, demands close scrutiny at a short distance, and links our senses together.
What once was the exclusive domain of trade unions and skilled craftspeople, the printing and making of handmade books by non-specialists has steadily gained in popularity as the electronic environment has spread. Students at every level now engage the art of the book—or book arts, as the field tends to be described by its participants. The term “book arts” refers to the study and practice of the making of books and related media as expressive artistic objects and for aesthetic purposes. This all-encompassing field rounds up the usual suspects—book design, history of the book, typography, printing, photography, binding, papermaking, artist books, publishing, conservation, among others. Emerging from a confluence of traditional crafts and late 20th century art theory, book arts leads us to think about how print images, paper surfaces, and their various structures create meaning, function culturally, and convey unique experiences as contemporary art.
Book arts education today takes place in at least one of three ways: as individual professional training with a person or team in a studio environment; within specialized classes at non-profit community organizations; and in courses or designated programs at colleges, universities, and art schools offered by a range of related disciplines—most often in departments of Art, English, History, Library & Information, and other hybrid meeting grounds, such as Book Studies. It may surprise us, but book arts opportunities—especially in terms of publishing presses, experimental typographical and printing studios, bibliographic research study programs—have been in the university longer than there have been community workshops teaching book arts. Notable historic examples include: Porter Garnett’s Laboratory Press at Carnegie-Tech in Pittsburgh, founded in 1923; the Eucalyptus Press, established at Mills College in 1930; most of the 12 residential colleges at Yale have had letterpress shops for student projects, beginning in 1936; Scripps College Press has been around since 1941; and Carroll Coleman moved his Prairie Press to the University of Iowa in the mid-1940s, where he taught classes and published books and broadsides. Each of these programs was custom built around the interests of the lead instructor, the funding base of the activities, and the administrative vision of the institution.
In response to the growth of teaching programs nationwide, the College Book Art Association (CBAA) was created in 2008 by college and university teachers who also print, bind, write, manage libraries, and make art—many who had met together informally during the previous thirty years. Although from different backgrounds and academic appointments, they all knew this diverse field had to have its own professional organization. These book arts educators held one of their most important organizational meetings at the University of Nevada, Reno in 2006, hosted by Bob Blesse, in which specific plans for the national non-profit were proposed and confirmed. With its own distinctive history as a bibliographic, publishing, and teaching program, the Black Rock Press has received national recognition as a place where inquisitive minds and hands (often working together) can expect to receive a grounding in the theoretical, historical, and craft foundations of contemporary artists’ bookmaking through classes and projects that combine studio work, scholarly study, collaborative potential, and independent initiative. Book arts education, in Nevada and around the country, is alive and well today.

*The Path,* 2003  
**Author:** Linda Hussa  
**Artist:** Theodore Waddell  
Letterpress printed

*The Constant Conversation,* 2000  
**Author:** A. Bartlett Giamatti  
**Artist:** Zoltan Janvary  
Letterpress printed and copperplate engraving
Although the practice is rewarding in itself, classes in letterpress printing and the other book arts do more than teach people how to make things using commercially obsolete technology. Technical instruction always brings with it a conceptual awareness that transcends the specific project.

The central activity in art is the making of things. Art classes start with the knowledge that is obtained through doing and through the senses. Because they unite language with images, book arts classes invariably offer more than visual or tactile experiences. Language preserves and extends complexity, for when we read art, we simultaneously look at text and image, and see through it, while reading silently or aloud.

A poet is a “maker” and it is an easy step to realize that the making of a book is a poetic act. Book art as a field of study at the University of Nevada, Reno and other important institutions offer significant opportunities for students to explore and create traditional and contemporary artists’ books in this rapidly evolving field, to bring into the world things that matter, and to savor the pleasures, within one’s own hands, of what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “the formality of actually occurring.”

Harry Reese

ISLA VISTA | 2013
NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, NTI-TRAVELING EXHIBITION

All of the broadsides in the NTI-Traveling Exhibition, *Words + Images: Broadsides from the Black Rock Press*, were produced at the Black Rock Press at the University of Nevada, Reno using the letterpress process with handset type and relief plates. The printing was done on a Vandercook cylinder proofing press.

**Brief History of the Black Rock Press**

Since it was founded by Kenneth J. Carpenter more than forty years ago, the Black Rock Press at the University of Nevada, Reno has been dedicated to the practice and teaching of the arts and crafts associated with the creation of finely printed books. The Press now has a national reputation for its outstanding work and has become a living museum of traditional printing technology, housing a variety of cabinets filled with metal type, and a number of historically significant printing presses. Its centerpiece, a gilded 1837 super-royal Columbian iron handpress, is one of the finest examples of a nineteenth century iron handpress to be found anywhere in the country.

Through the Press’s program of publishing books and broadsides, it seeks to create literary and artistic works of high merit in well designed and crafted limited and commercially printed editions. Most of the work is done at the Press itself, using both traditional and contemporary book production methods.

The Press received wide acclaim for Ken Carpenter’s first Black Rock Press book, *Springing of the Blade*, poems by William Everson. This was followed by what is considered to be his masterpiece, *Straight with the Medicine*. Carpenter’s legacy has continued throughout the years and has been exemplified by the Press’s outstanding design and production of *Finding the Space*, poems by the renowned American poet, Gary Snyder; and followed by the award-winning limited edition, *Cartwheels*, by Steven Nightingale. Along with limited edition books, the Press also produces books of contemporary writing for its Rainshadow Editions series, by both emerging and established writers. *Blood Sister I am to These Fields*, by Linda Hussa, won three major awards as poetry book of the year.
Letterpress broadsides printed by the Black Rock Press are created for numerous reasons, frequently to honor a visiting writer, a campus event. The Press produced broadsides to honor university residencies by U.S. Poets Laureate Robert Pinsky and Billy Collins. Several broadsides were printed in conjunction with a national poetry broadside competition held in the 1990s; winning poets received cash awards and had their poems printed as broadsides. In recent years, broadsides have been produced for the Robert Laxalt Distinguished Writers Award, presented annually by the university’s Reynolds School of Journalism. Each broadside features a quotation from the writings of Robert Laxalt, one of Nevada’s finest writers. Most of the broadsides in this exhibit were designed and printed by Bob Blesse, director of the Black Rock Press. Others have also contributed, including John Balkwill who was in residence as a book artist and printmaker at the Press during the mid-1990s. Many former students also assisted with the design, production, and illustration of the broadsides.

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*Postcard, 1998*

*Author:* Michael White  
*Artist:* Bob Blesse  
Letterpress printed
Through its instructional programs, the Press introduces students to the graphic arts techniques and intellectual disciplines involved with the creation of books and related materials. They are encouraged to develop an appreciation of books as special kinds of objects, whose form can help reveal its content. In the Book Arts course, students learn typographic design and letterpress printing, as well as the historical aspects of printing and book production. Students also learn other aspects of bookmaking including image making techniques, bookbinding, papermaking, and paper decoration. In addition to its own classes, the Black Rock Press works closely with university classes in art, history, English, and journalism, providing orientations, in-depth tours, and lectures on various aspects of the book arts. The goal of the Press is to make its resources as a center for interdisciplinary activities in the book arts available to the university community and beyond.

To properly fulfill its role as a book arts program in an institution of higher learning, The Black Rock Press seeks to promote an awareness of the significance of books and their related arts to the history and future of culture. In an era of rapid changes in communications technology, the Black Rock Press seeks to provide an historical perspective on the importance of book arts and the printed word to the unfolding process of human knowledge and the creative process.

Bob Blesse
RENO | 2013

Heirloom, 1999
Author: Donna Johnson
Artist: Black Rock Press
Letterpress printed

Things of Intrinsic Worth, 2004
Author: Wally McRae
Artist: Clint McRae
Letterpress printed
Broadside is a large sheet of paper printed on one side. They began to appear in the 15th Century, soon after Gutenberg's development of movable type and the spread of printing. In Britain, early broadsides were used to inform the public about government decrees, proclamations, meetings, and events, for advertising, and as a vehicle for selling popular poetry, song, and music. Broadsides, also known as broadsheets, were sold for a penny apiece and were intended to be short-lived. They were often used as a vehicle for political agitation. During the reformation Martin Luther and his followers used printed broadsides and other propaganda to attack the Pope.

After the first American printing press was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1638, broadsides appeared immediately. Along with government announcements and news, early American broadsides included commercial announcements and popular and topical songs. The most famous American broadside, the Dunlap Broadside, is the Declaration of Independence, printed by John Dunlap of Philadelphia on the night of July 4, 1776 in an edition of approximately 200 copies.

Today, broadsides are produced as an artistic form, usually containing a poem or quotation accompanied by an image. Frequently produced by small printers using fine paper and the letterpress process, contemporary broadsides are intended to be framed and displayed.
Creating a Broadside
Producing a broadside includes numerous decisions and processes.

DESIGN: An overall design that integrates text and image is created.

FONT: A typeface with appropriate sizes for the text, title, and colophon* is selected.

IMAGES: An artist creates an image for the broadside. These images may be a drawing, linoleum cut, or a relief plate of some kind.

COLORS: Inks are selected, generally black for the text, a title color, and an image color.

PAPER: A range of beautiful paper choices, frequently European, work beautifully for broadsides. A stock frequently used at the Black Rock Press is Rives BFK, a printmaking paper with lovely texture and color that is produced at the Rives paper mill in southern France.

TYPESETTING: The textual component of a broadside is usually handset type from the cases at the Press or, in recent years, production of a relief plate using the photopolymer process.

PRESS RUNS: The printing of a broadside usually includes several press runs, one each for the text, image, title, and colophon. The press must be cleaned and new ink applied for each color used.

FINISHING: Once the final press run is completed, the broadsides must dry for 24 hours. The broadside is then ready to be signed by the author, distributed or sold.

*The Colophon is a short statement about the production of the work, the number of copies printed, date of printing, and who was responsible for the production. This usually appears at the bottom of the broadside.
**Bob Blesse**

For more than 25 years, Bob Blesse has been the director of the Black Rock Press, a nationally recognized book arts program that teaches the history, art and craft of finely printed books and publishes hand printed, limited edition books, broadsides and editions of contemporary literature. During this time he has designed and produced more than 65 publications, many of which have been recognized with awards. Head of the Special Collections Department in the University of Nevada, Reno Library for 25 years, Blesse is currently a Professor of Art in the Department of Art. In 1999 he received a Nevada Governor's Arts Award for Lifetime Contributions to the Arts. He is a native of Oakland, California and has an M.A. in English from California State University, Chico, and a Masters of Library and Information Studies from UCLA.

**Harry Reese**

An artist whose work involves many aspects of the hand-produced book, Harry Reese is a Professor in the Department of Art at University of California, Santa Barbara—where he has taught classes in printmaking, book arts, papermaking, visual literacy, public art, and media ecology since 1978. For the past six years he has served as the Associate Dean of the College of Creative Studies. In addition to making and exhibiting his own prints and paintings, he has worked on seven public art projects since 1991 as a consultant, collaborator, and/or solo artist.

For more than three decades, Reese has published limited edition books and prints, in partnership with Sandra Liddell Reese, for their Turkey Press & Edition Reese imprints. These projects are known for their letterpress printing, distinctive bindings, relief prints, handmade paper, and unconventional image making. The Press has received grants and recognition from a number of organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the College Book Art Association, and the Getty Research Institute, which purchased the archives of Turkey Press in 1992.
WEBSITES
BLACK ROCK PRESS — blackrockpress.org
TURKEY PRESS · EDITION REESE — turkeypress.net

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