

Ten Poems for Pandora, 2005.

Wood Type (Oak Knoll Books, 2004), joined catalogues documenting group shows and solo retrospectives, testifying to sustained interest in the key artists and organizations of 21st century letterpress.

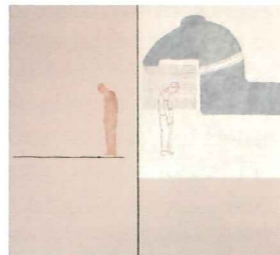
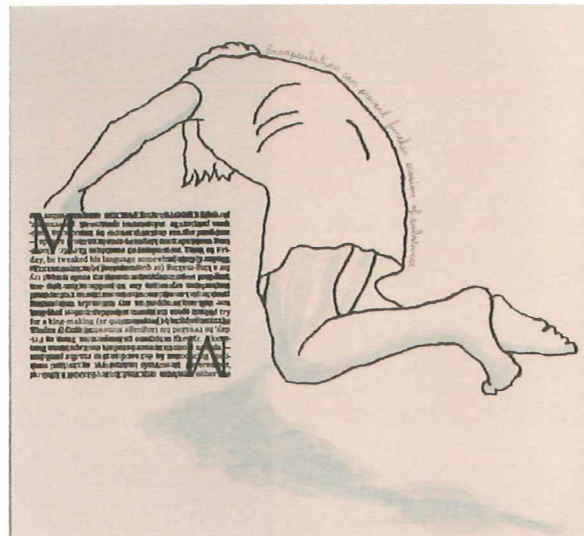
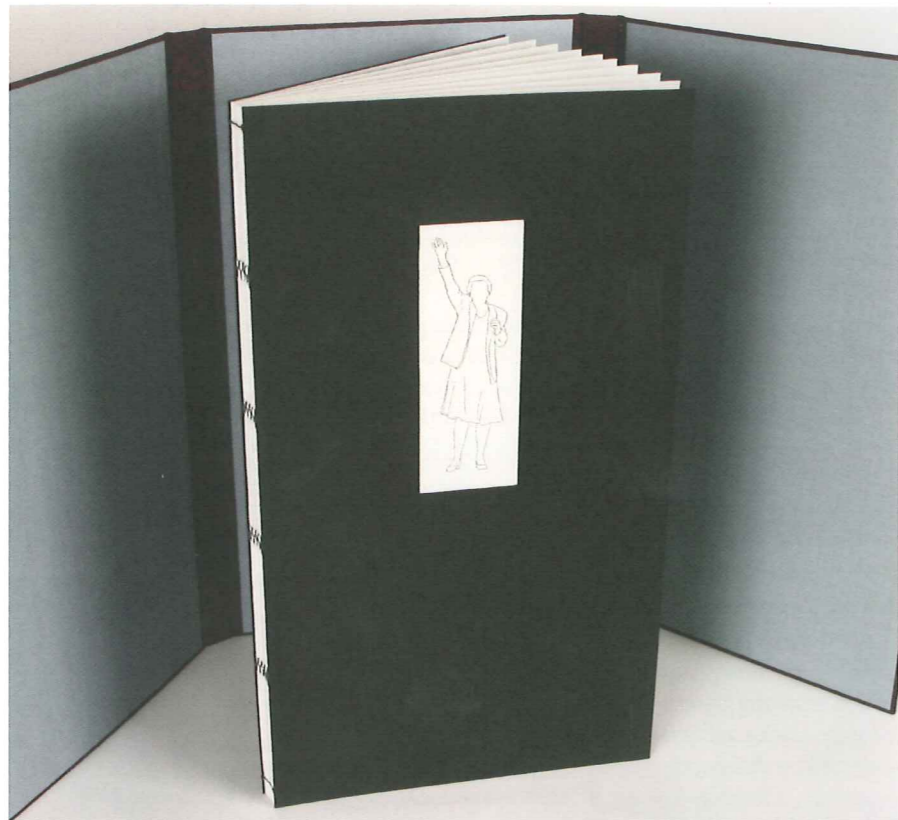
Tools and technology remain central to letterpress. In an oft-recounted story, by the 1980s the letterpress medium appeared doomed to obsolescence due to the disappearance of proofing presses, as printing establishments shifted into phototypesetting. The slow disappearance of proofing presses led to a drop in demand for hot type and the closing of type foundries. Wood type was prized for its graphic impact, but metal type was needed for printing large amounts of text and to hold up to the demands of long print runs. Hot type was the voice of the printer, and that voice was growing faint.

Amid such worrisome losses (echoed by declines in the trade publishing world, which inspired—yet again—predictions of the end of books) a handful of letterpress printers recognized the opportunity represented by digital technology allied with the photopolymer platemaker. Improved page layout software could now carry digital fonts created by designers trained in calligraphy and type design. Desktop

publishing connected to the photopolymer platemaker produced plastic relief plates that carried imagery and text on the same plate and with a high degree of resolution. In the mid-1980s a magnetic flat base was developed that could hold a polymer plate in the bed of the press as ink rollers passed over it. Because the plate could now be produced as a sheet through a water-soluble process, the printer was freed from exposure to toxic chemicals.

By the 1990s printers began to work with the new tools. Key books included Jim Trissel's *The Cycle of the Day. a Book of Hours* (1991); Claire Van Vliet's *Bone Songs* (1992); and Gerald Lange's *Kill Series* (1992).² Fortunately, high quality metal type is still available, notably at Mackenzie & Harris, thanks to Andrew Hoyem and Arion Press's astute acquisition of the venerable type foundry in 1989. Technical refinements and improvements also continue to augment the printing process, such as the invention of the Boxcar Base system by Harold "Jay" Kyle.

² To read further on this key development, see Gerald Lange's *Digital Printing on the Cylinder Hand Press* (1998), at <http://bielerpressxi.blogspot.com/>.



Unable to Find Each Other, Let Alone Ourselves, 2007.

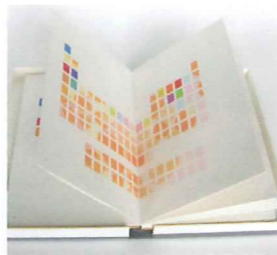
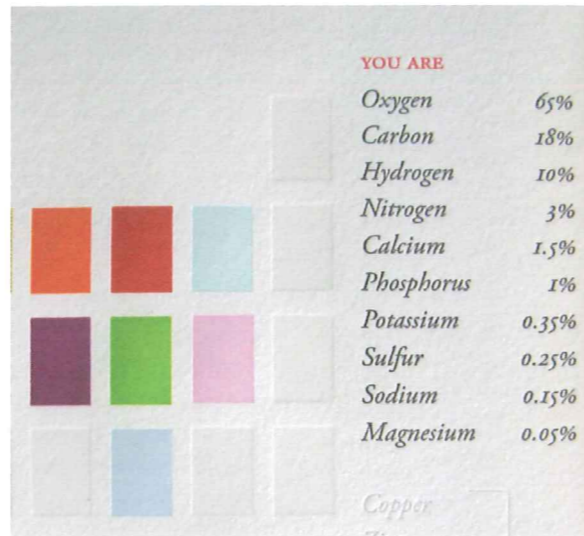
In addition to type, questions about the availability of presses create ongoing debate and concern among printers. The general consensus is that there are plenty of presses available today (hand presses, platen presses—some of which are automatic—and other auto-feed presses), but the kind of press that most printers prefer (at least in the U.S.) for ease of use and consistently strong results is the cylinder proofing press, in particular the Vandercook press. Printers appreciate that the bed of the Vandercook press doesn't move, and that its rollers distribute ink evenly across the forme (of type and other relief material) that is locked in place. However, Vandercook presses have not been produced for several decades, and the designs for Vandercook's different models rarely duplicate the parts in previous models, so nearly every replacement need is unique—and expensive—if a part must be machined. These factors have driven up the cost of owning a Vandercook to the degree that some enterprising printers acquire a “junkier” Vandercook to furnish replacement parts.

There are other options, however. A recent query sent to the Letpress listserv yielded replies that were lengthy, anecdotal, and opinionated. Several printers acknowledged the ease of operation and reliable

results that the Vandercook provides, but also noted that other presses do not include the up-charge of the popular Vandercook. Printers in Europe note the strengths of the FAG (Swiss) and the KORREX (German) brands. In truth there are several brands of cylinder proofing presses (and platen presses, and others)—it is just a matter of finding them. Perhaps a complete picture of letterpress today is that it is varied and can meet a number of interests and pocketbooks, but, as David Rose notes on his Five Roses Press website, the Vandercook is preferred for printers who want “the highest quality for short runs or large sheets, and have space and a lot of money.”³

With the Internet, printers discovered the tremendous potential to connect in all meanings of the word. In 1994, Peter Verheyen, current Head of Preservation and Conservation at Syracuse University Library, founded the Book-Arts listserv and affiliated web site. That act effectively telescoped a sprawling global book art movement onto one's keyboard. Beyond networking and information-sharing, the

³ The site is called *Introduction to Letterpress Printing in the 21st Century*, at: <http://www.fiveroses.org/intro.htm#Welcome>, accessed on 14 November 2011.



Biography, 2011.

listserv facilitates artist collaborations, the education of a collecting audience, and the maturation of the field as a whole. Ten years later in 2004 Verheyen founded the first on-line journal for the field, *The Bonefolder*.

In the first decade of the 21st century the reconfigured role and international identity for letterpress has prompted efforts to claim a place for it in the wider book and art worlds. In 2005 printer Peter Koch and Susan Filter founded the CODEX Foundation to preserve and promote the art and craft of the book through publications and a biennial symposium and book fair strong in international participation.

Technology remains at the heart of letterpress, and opinions on the state of printing vary with each printer's circumstances. Artistic expression for 21st century letterpress is represented by aging equipment which today is often paired with digitally-mediated relief plates: analog with digital, hand to machine. There is no better summary of letterpress as a millennial technology, not because it is "of the moment," but because it carries the past into the present and finds a meeting place in the future.

Now, let us consider the state of letterpress as represented by the exhibited works, which are organized into seven thematic categories. Each book is listed only once, but note that its placement illustrates only one characteristic out of several. Since each theme expresses a driving force that led to a book's creation, the themes together delineate the universe of interests that letterpress inhabits today: voice, memory, idea, mark, material, place, and change.