

Be Spoken To: a highly disciplined cross-disciplinary project

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Biography

Caren Florance is a research student and sessional design tutor in the Faculty of Arts & Design at the University of Canberra, Australia. Her doctoral research is titled 'Becoming/being the book: collaborative materiality, poetry and the artist's book as research space.' She often works under the imprint Ampersand Duck, and is an artist whose work focuses on the book and the printed word, using traditional letterpress and bookbinding processes along with more contemporary technologies. She also teaches at the ANU School of Art and is collected by national and international institutions, mostly libraries.

Abstract

My practice inhabits the Venn overlaps of art, design and craft, using traditional and contemporary technologies to tease out connections between art practice and writing practice. My research project involves active collaboration with four poets to make works on paper (and sometimes off paper). Each poet has their own distinct methodology with which I endeavour to engage in a bespoke manner as both artist and designer. I teach book arts and graphic design both materially and theoretically across two institutions; I have found that my work with poets and their interaction with my material processes enriches and enhances my teaching methods.

This paper presents a case study of one of the collaborative projects. One of 'my' poets, Melinda Smith, worked with me on a site-specific residency project within the Museum of Australian Democracy in Old Parliament House, Canberra. We wanted to test how our respective working methods could combine, and aimed to engage a broad spectrum audience with a poetic situation. That project is now moving/growing into/through two other publishing artifacts: a chapbook (for a poetry audience) and an artists' book (for a visual arts audience). Some of the techniques that we explored together within the project's development may provide new affordances for visual art, design and writing education and practice.

Keywords: collaboration, materiality, design, visual arts, creative publishing

Be Spoken To: a highly disciplined cross-disciplinary project

In 2013 poet Melinda Smith and I were thinking about a way to work together as part of my doctoral research project, which involves active collaboration with poets as a means of investigating overlaps of visual art publishing and poetry publishing and to tease out tacit rules of engagement and boundaries when working with poetry in an artistic context. Melinda and I had worked together before in small ways but this needed to be a project with teeth and legs, that is, something that would keep us engaged over a few years. But where to start?

I teach two cross-disciplinary tertiary single-semester elective units. One is book arts, the other is a material exploration of typography within visual art and design. Each are broad topics, with multiple pathways and directions, and the students, who can enrol from any area of the broader university, are often initially overwhelmed by choice. Students are faced with an overwhelming amount of information on an everyday level – several lifetimes of other people’s experiences and knowledge, all at once. I teach them that they don’t have to expand: they can contract, gain tools to manage the stimuli, and learn to edit, curate, and make decisions. Creative constraints (self-chosen rules, individually constructed to suit their personal interests) and/or material constraints (available materials, tools and equipment) are a way to negotiate and intensify their relationship with the world and with their own creativity. In both units, I present the artists’ book as a flexible research tool that operates simultaneously as a creative and material constraint and offers thematic heuristics, sensory modality and constant opportunity for reflexivity. This paper offers my research collaboration with Melinda as a case-study of how these constraints and the artist’s book form can simultaneously open out and guide a project.

i. material poetics

My studio practice utilizes all forms of the book, but particularly the artist’s book. I use a mix of contemporary and traditional technologies, particularly hand-set letterpress, which I use as a printmaking tool, pushing it to see what it can do that other textual production can’t. I work with my own texts often, but working actively with a writer provides a transdisciplinary extension and challenge.

My work is primarily informed by material bibliography, a method of investigating a book’s social and economic history by closely examining its physical qualities (see, for example, Rota, 1998: 13). Reversing this process, I use or highlight the book’s various physical qualities singularly or in pared-down combinations to create/expose/embed new meanings. This parsing of book parts and qualities is an engagement with *material poetics*. Poet

Charles Bernstein says 'Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means' (1992: 160); I see material poetics as the continuation of materiality towards other meanings.

Every discipline has its own perspective on what materiality means to its work and process. Stuart talks of 'poems as language-objects, comprised of both a *material basis* (the way in which readers derive a response from a text) and *material expression* (the physical/virtual form in which the poem is presented to us)' (2009: 02, np). Lorange compiles ways that writers think about the materiality of writing in terms of *composition*, *strangeness*, *signifying*, and *affinitive acts* (2014: 36-40), all of which could be (and are, in my project) applied to the making of an artist's book in collaboration as an artist with a writer.

Visual arts and craft disciplines – when they are resisting pure opticality – work with 'direct engagement with specific material properties' (Adamson 2007: 39), which means foregrounding the qualities that belong to that particular material: e.g., the heavy softness of lead; the fluidity of paint; the bite of acid; the clarity of glass. These elements can be explored/resisted/expanded on a purely physical level, but when you add an exploration of what associative meanings can be embedded in a material, then we are moving closer to the way writers think, and closer to material poetics. Material poetics is two-pronged: it is performing Heidegger's 'thingness of the thing', and it is imbuing the thingness with one's own knowledge of its context and history to tease out new connections.

Every component of the book and every stage of its composition and production has its own poetics, and this, creatively, is rich pickings. Poetry is also rich pickings, as it is not only multi-layered linguistically, but performatively designed at the composition stage. Each poet I work with has their own distinct composition methodology with which I endeavour to engage, and the poets experience and/or create degrees of affect when interacting with my material studio processes. So working together to compose has to take into account what materiality means to both of us and how that will make a corresponding material manifestation.

ii. temporality

Melinda Smith is a Canberra-based poet; she trained as a lawyer at ANU and worked for a number of years in the public service before being liberated into poetic professionalism by winning the 2014 Prime Minister's Literary Award with her fourth collection *Drag down to unlock or place an emergency call* (2013). Melinda, currently the poetry editor for the *Canberra Times*, writes intelligent and often very humorous work, with a sharp political and feminist sensibility, and much of it uses wordplay processes such as acrostics, puns and anagrams. She is a mother of two, one of whom has intensive medical needs. She is therefore an extremely organized person with very little time. Working together could not be

an open-ended nebulous free-fall, waiting to see what emerged. We needed a project with clear objectives and strict time management.

Around the same time, an opportunity arose in the form of an exhibition residency call-out offered jointly by Craft ACT and the Museum of Australian Democracy. It invited artists to respond creatively to particular rooms and objects within an existing exhibition in Old Parliament House (OPH) in Canberra to form a nested exhibition. Melinda's interest in found text, especially with legal, political and historical origins, made this an appealing project. We successfully tendered for the "Sign Room", a collection of hand-lettered signs outlining rules, regulations and directions for negotiating the building and its activities. While thinking about this project, we came up with a list of possible outcomes that could flow from the initial body of work, and thus forged a clear path for our ongoing collaboration.



Figure 1, a & b. MoAD 'Sign Room', 2014.

The first was the exhibition, *Be Spoken To*, a site-specific installation work responding to the cluster of hand-painted, wooden signs. This would be *in situ* for a whole year, performing to a broad audience of all ages. The second, a poetry chapbook, most likely to be read by the poetry community. The third, a limited edition artists' book that could be exhibited in libraries and galleries, and perhaps in the museum that inspired it. Each outcome not only has a different audience but different material opportunities and 'rules of engagement'. At the time of writing, the chapbook is in manuscript form, and the artists' book is in production.

iii. *Be Spoken To*: MoAD 'Bespoke' exhibition 2014–15

The only stipulation for the residency and exhibition was responsiveness to the space and its history, which is a broad brief, and we felt that establishing creative constraints would help negotiate the task. We decided that the signs themselves were our focus, partially because we found ourselves anthropomorphizing them in our conversations. To start, we intricately parsed the signs. Melinda transcribed all their text, and I paid close attention to their physical features: they were wooden in various brown tones, with gold and black imperfect lettering, thanks to their hand-painted calligraphy executed by in-house sign-writers.



Figure 2, a & b. MoAD signs: head, hand, feet.

They had page-faces, sturdy feet, and occasionally hands (manicules: hand symbols with pointing fingers), which evoked *personhood*. We thought about the nature of the OPH building itself, completed in 1927: solid (*dependable*), white (*pure*) with pared-down geometric 'stripped classical' elements (*ordered*) that deliberately evoked the British Empire's Union Jack (*authority*) and solid, furnishings of wood and leather (*masculine*). We decided that these elements should be used as a visual palette.

After a few conversations and some word play on by Melinda with the transcribed text, we decided we liked the idea of exploring *dialogue*: the signs were to mirror themselves, one set (*official*) behind the protection of glass and the other (*the people*) in public space, facing them, evoking the social history of the building (*debate/democracy/dissent*). Melinda used

only the sign text available to us, which she cut up, rearranged, and rebuilt to create a corresponding cluster of words in poetic dialogue with the originals, re-contextualising their messages into nonsensical commands and wry pokes at the authority and entitlement projected from the original signs. For example:



Figure 3. one of the 'Be Spoken To' signs, 2014.

ONLY about HALF THE PUBLIC ARE APPRECIATED
TAKE NO NOTICE
Members ARE ONLY REPRESENTATIVES
REPRESENTATIVES are STRICTLY VISITORS

And

GALLERIES of the set apart
ONLY THE ALLOWED
ONLY THE PERMITTED
ONLY in THIS HOUSE
NOT THE NEXT

This method of composition utilizes a particular creative constraint, that of 'found writing', or what Goldsmith calls 'uncreative writing' (2011): we used the words in the space, about the space, to generate a new work. Goldsmith's basic thesis is that no matter the source of the text, the borrowing author retains a powerful capacity for *choice* in how that text is managed, parsed, organized and distributed; these decisions are what makes the writing creative and distinctive (2011: 9). This is a useful strategy with students who feel lost in the face of an empty page; a found text can be altered, repurposed, translated, even erased.

Be Spoken To, we agreed, needed to be accessible to a broad audience who might not be interested in formal poetry. We both believe in the efficacy of humour and play as a strategy for reception, and we decided that the anthropomorphism we were feeling was an entry point for those not used to engaging with poetry. The original signs had distinct personalities, from didactic to quirky, and their presentation in a contained, spot-lit room had its own affect: there were evocative thrown shadows (*threat*) and implied conversations between the objects (*conspiracy*). Being in the space together discussing our joint and individual reactions felt radical, democratic: the traditional demarcation between writer and printer was blurred. I would not be merely receiving her words and presenting them in print-space; instead we would be performing their genesis and development from a position of shared experience.



Figure 4. hand-set wood type letterpress, ready to print, 2014.

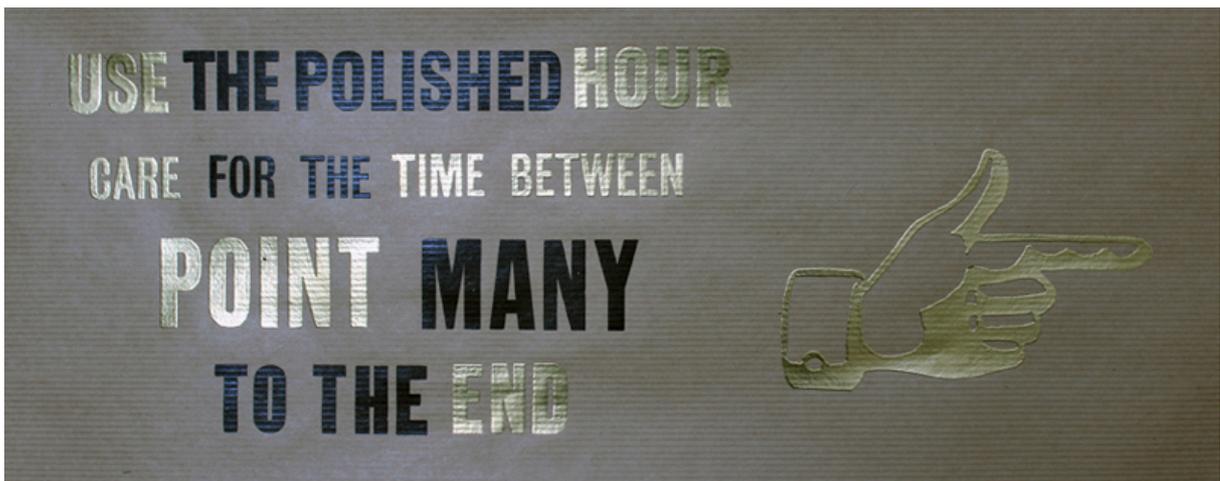


Figure 5. letterpress print in black and gold on brown paper, 2014.

Happily the MoAD staff were open to this idea, and we were able to go together to the MoAD archives to select some unused sign-stands, where we discovered 'ghost bags,' the simple and haunting white Tyvek slipcovers that protect archived objects from dust and damage. We

selected a variety of original ‘retired’ signs, for which I letterpress-printed new page-faces for them using hand-set wood type (*wood*) in black ink (*authority*) with sections of embossing powder highlights (*gold*) on brown paper (*historical tone*). I wanted to use only what was in my studio, another enclosed room with objects that related to each other as a system: the press, type, paper and ink (*press gallery*), my time setting up each letter, cutting the paper, applying the gold embellishment (*labour/value*). At one point during the initial experimental printing I realised that we could use the black ink and gold foiling powder intermittently to further play with the textual reading, a playful mark-up of key words enthusiastically implemented by Melinda.



Figure 6. ‘Be Spoken To’ sign cluster in situ, facing the Sign Room, 2014.

The resulting work was slyly subversive, a sign cluster that felt like a small crowd of varying heights, weights and ages facing off the authority of the originals and their attendant historical contexts. They seemed to represent the ‘ordinary’ people, having their own say: poetic, philosophical, ‘bolshie’ but avoiding the ‘elitist’ concept of poetry that many people seem to have.

iv. Members Only: poetry chapbook

The MoAD experience generated a lot of ideas and texts for us, but only a few of them were possible to use in the installation work, partly because of space, but also because we thought some of the texts were a bit too politically pointed for MoAD to be comfortable with, a fear

compounded by the fact that at the time of installation, Melinda was a public servant and there are now strict rules about their expression of partisan opinion. Melinda is extremely productive, and the 'uncreative writing' process was exciting. While the installation had a broad and unfocussed general audience, there are ways we can reach more dedicated audiences, by using different formats.

Bourdieu says that one is able to move around and across cultural fields by paying attention to the *markers* that the members of those respective fields find desirable (1993:95), or, in other words, tacit 'rules of engagement'. We had a variety of texts: original responsive poems, the recycled sign texts that had been used in the installation and others that hadn't, lists of computer-generated anagrams from words and phrases that had caught our eyes, and tentative ideas for further writings. The more resolved works could form a poetry chapbook, a small, self-published volume that could be simply printed in order to be taken to readings and sold in bookshops. The markers in this scenario are: soft cover, simply bound, affordable, a size that is easily held in the hand, usually one poem per page, elegantly arranged, perhaps with a few scattered images or decorative elements. A chapbook is related to the *chapter*, and is rarely more than 32 pages, the maximum thickness of a single folded quire (*signature*) of paper. Chapbooks are thus easily able to be themed. They are a popular form both at the high end of the field – fine press publications – as they are small enough to print by hand without being grueling, but also at the low end because they can be cheap and easy to produce via internet print-on-demand services or stapled together at a local print provider like Officeworks.

Our chapbook, titled *Members Only*, will be situated between the two poles. It will be a print-on-demand 'perfect-bound' book, distributed in poetry circles, which is Melinda's core audience. This is a new sector of activity for me; interacting with this community since embarking on my research has already extended the reach of my practice. I have started writing reviews for poetry journals *Cordite* and *foam:e* about material poetics, in which I try to make connections between poetry books and artists' books, and draw attention to the materiality of poetry publishing (Cordite, 2016). There are many crossovers, sharing similar concerns.

v. 1962: Be Spoken To (Ghost Bags): artists' book

Making an artists' book means that we can be typographically freer and visually more playful than with the other two projects, because its destination is a visual audience. When thinking about the layout of artists' books, 'it is important to have a springboard, not a rule book', says Keith Smith (1984: 58). Artists' books are so varied in form and purpose that there is still no holistic definition for them; the one that best fits this particular situation was articulated by

Lucy Lippard: 'Neither an art book... nor a book on art... the artists' book is a work of art on its own, conceived specifically for the book form and often published by the artist him/herself.' (1977: 40-41) Also, 'they can be all words, all images, or combinations thereof. At best they are a lively hybrid of exhibition, narrative, and object' (Lyon (ed) 1985: 49). This is what makes them so perfect for teaching students from all disciplines; they are able to materially adapt to a wide gamut of approaches.

Book artist Dick Higgins says that 'Every time we turn the page, the previous page passes into our past and we are confronted by a new world' (1996: 103). This echoes the movement through a conventional poetry book, with each page holding a poem that is an encapsulated world. With *Ghost Bags* (the working title) we are heightening this use of space, with each pagefold becoming an architectural space, and the entire book forming a building, *the building*, Old Parliament House. Each page spread is a room (Italian: *stanza*) and the textblocks are its furniture (*letterpress term for spacing blocks*).

Making the book into the building was a good start, but the spread and depth of the history of OPH seemed too complex to work with, especially with the open possibilities of the artist book form. We decided to give ourselves an extra creative constraint: time. We would pick a year, and apply the sign texts to that parliamentary year to discover and reveal monthly themes. Somewhere in that day's conversation, we chose 1962, plucked from the air when talking about Aboriginal rights (the year they were enfranchised to vote (CT 1962:10)). Our key source text was Hansard, which Melinda trawled for ideas, searching with key words that we had brainstormed, and stopping to pluck out chunks of texts to repurpose poetically. Robert Menzies was solidly in power, we found Gough Whitlam building up steam and the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Communist Party affecting the cigar-fugged calm. The parliamentary sitting calendar became our book's rhythm, and if we had a month that parliament didn't sit, we turned to the local newspaper, the *Canberra Times*, via Trove. Each page spread is a month of the year, and the page size, formed by once-folding large sheets of textured cream paper, echo both the face-size of our wooden signs and the broadsheet spread of a newspaper.

Ghost Bags therefore will have 12 sections lightly bound, with a separate title/colophon text. Each section is a month, a room, and a theme: *architecture, landscape, construction, health, women, media, indigenous affairs, communism, political change, national threat, commemoration, and masculinity*. All work separately but intertwine. There will be composition, erasure, silence, noise: exhibition and narrative, in an object.



Figure 7, a & b. Screenprinted architecture and letterpressed months ghosted along the tail of the page.

At the time of writing, production has started, with an edition of 6 planned, which makes each book precious, an undemocratic artefact that will be protected by its own Tyvek slipcase (*ghostbag*). When a copy is exhibited by me, the readers will be able to touch and turn each page with their bare hands; if a copy is bought by an institution, there is a chance that it will never be touched by ungloved hands again, and it will be frozen behind glass in a double-spread tableau, like the signs that inspired it.

vi. conclusion

There are a number of creative publishing possibilities for collaborative projects, but the artists' book (which is in Cabau's words a 'transversality between streams' (2014:8)), provides an extremely fertile and flexible research space for cross-disciplinary collaboration. For Melinda and I, transversing the same space from differing approaches has enhanced the generation of new meanings from existing information. For my students, they are able to think about the qualities that fascinate them in their particular practice or field and use that as a starting point with the book. For example, a glass artist might work with light, translucency or fragility as a material and/or thematic approach; as they heuristically work through the various stages of book-making, they often discover perspectives that feed back into their major work. This sense of honing, creating constraint, is not a shrinking of choice: it is an opening up of meaning, and possibilities.

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