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NY CULTURE

# Bringing Books Back for Digital Generation

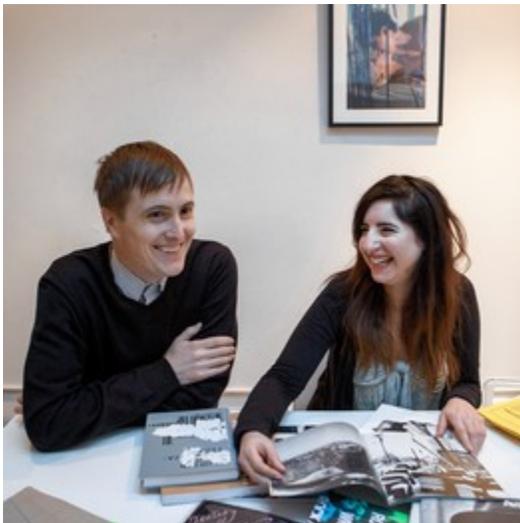
*Downtown Publisher Specializes in Resurrecting Artists' Books*

By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Updated Dec. 9, 2013 9:32 a.m. ET

Books fulfill many functions, as keepers of records and containers for stories, but can they serve as art exhibitions too?

For the downtown publisher Primary Information, which specializes in printing and resurrecting books and other writing by artists, they can.



Primary Information publishers James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff Gaia Squarci for *The Wall Street Journal*



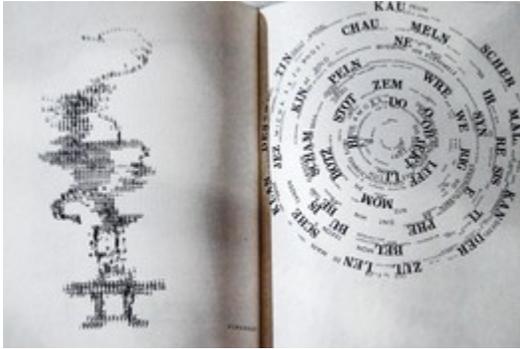
"The thing about artists' books is that you're supposed to be able to look at them and hold them and feel them," co-founder James Hoff said in Primary Information's makeshift office, located behind a SoHo gallery. "They're supposed to move through the world."

The publisher has been around for eight years, but it will be particularly busy this month as it prepares for two releases. One is "An Anthology of Concrete Poetry," an avant-garde title that sold 19,000 copies when it was originally published in 1967. The other is "Quincy," by the sculptor Carl Andre, which had a small print run in 1973.

Original copies of "Concrete Poetry" have been known to fetch more than \$200 among collectors, but the book has long been out of print. Primary Information is bringing it back to bookstores in facsimile form. A used copy of "Quincy" can cost \$700, but Primary Information's reprint is priced at \$20.

"We try to match everything as closely as possible," said Miriam Katzeff, Mr. Hoff's

Pages from 'The Anthology of Concrete Poetry,' which was originally published in 1967 *Gaia Squarci for The Wall Street Journal*



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business partner. "We have to add a bar code and ISBN number that's just ours, but a big part of our conversation is how to let material speak for itself and give the feeling of its time. We want to have a really small footprint."

Mr. Hoff and Ms. Katzeff started Primary Information in 2005, in a nod to the tradition of artist publishing that flourished in New York in the 1960s and '70s. That was the era of enterprises such as Something Else Press, which thought of the book as a self-contained medium for art projects that could be installed between two covers and passed around. Work by writers like Marshall McLuhan and Gertrude Stein shared a home with more artistically expansive books by Claes Oldenburg and Dick

Higgins, the Fluxus artist who founded Something Else in 1963.

"He really believed in the idea that the book could exist as a vessel for art and that the artist book could entertain the same place in the American fascination as the Harlequin romance novel," Mr. Hoff said of his forebear. "He hired door-to-door salesman to sell these."

Rescuing and republishing past classics has been the focus of Primary Information from the start, when Mr. Hoff and Ms. Katzeff met while working at the New York art-book store Printed Matter. Projects they have published since include a boxed-set reproduction of the '70s art journal *Avalanche* and "Destroy All Monsters Magazine," a compendium of art and writings from the endearingly strange rock band affiliated with the artist Mike Kelley.

As a publisher, Primary Information has helped make rare material more widely available, said Branden W. Joseph, an art historian at Columbia University, "taking it out of the hands of collectors and research libraries and putting it in the hands of younger artists, curators and historians."

It operates as a nonprofit organization and relies on support from foundations and fundraising efforts, as its costs routinely exceed revenue.

"We end up losing money on every book, essentially," Mr. Hoff said. "Accessible price points are fundamental to the mission statement."

"They have a much-needed curatorial vision, making available classic, almost mythic artist books and reintroducing them to a new generation," said Max Schumann, associate director at Printed Matter. "We're witnessing an amazing renaissance of young artists who are really interested in the book form."

Conserving the status of books as material objects to be picked up and thumbed through is another priority for Primary Information.

"We want to encourage younger artists to approach books in the same way that older artists were," Ms. Katzeff said. "Maybe we've gotten to the point where you can see the limits of a website and online publication."

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

In an earlier version of this article, the publisher Primary Information was incorrectly named Public Information in one reference.

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