

Art : Interview

September 25, 2014

Primary Information by Matthew Erickson

Books as an exhibition space, reprinting archival material, and some thoughts on the current state of art publishing.



Primary Information's catalog is as broad as it is deep. Over the course of nearly a decade in arts publishing, the duo—curator Miriam Katzeff and artist James Hoff—have produced printed matter and sound work that reach back to the archives of the mid-century avant-gardes and put it in dialogue with a diverse span of current artistic practices. Their work as historical excavators is highly regarded; through their facsimiles, Hoff and Katzeff have brought back into circulation a number of seminal artists'

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many others. Primary Information's role as publisher of the contemporary is equally crucial, having produced original and boundary-pushing artists' books by Elad Lassry, Florian Hecker, Lutz Bacher, Sarah Crowner, and others. (Lassry's *On Onions*, a strange and encyclopedic montage devoted to the bulb, is one of my personal favorites. The book was named "Artist Book of the Year" by *Art in America* in 2013.) Add to this a handful of LPs that range from no wave to noise and sound poetry, and you're looking at a shelf of titles that is more tastefully curated and well-assembled than that of any other publisher working today.

I spoke on the phone with Katzeff not long after Primary Information mounted an exhibition at White Columns in New York spotlighting *ALBUM*, a collage-magazine by the Norwegian artists Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveen. Primary Information will publish the first ten issues of the magazine as a book in September.

Matthew Erickson Let's start at the beginning. Looking through your bibliography, it seems like the first few years of Primary Information were mainly dedicated to putting out facsimile editions of fairly rare or obscure artists' magazines and ephemera. What was the original incentive to start doing this?

Miriam Katzeff We started Primary Information with the intention of publishing both new and historical projects. We were inspired by small European publishers who put an emphasis on artists' books, but at the time, we didn't see American counterparts and we wanted to c

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that we want to highlight. These publications were out of print, expensive, or overlooked, but showcased artists' writings and criticism or artists' projects made for print. We thought these works could not only remind artists of the possibilities of print but were also important to re-circulate for art historians and the general public.

ME Do you see a split between the facsimile work and the publication of contemporary material?

MK There is another category, too: historical material that has never been printed in book form before. So this could be a new publication of older material. They are referred to differently, but I ultimately think about them in the same way because a lot of people discover these materials for the first time via the facsimiles.

ME Can you give an example?

MK Lee Lozano's *Notebooks*. That was a book that we compiled by working with her estate. She made all of these notebooks and she considered each page a drawing—which were then sold individually—and we worked to reconstruct the notebooks. Some of those drawings, or pages, had been reproduced in other books, but there hadn't been a book that presented the notebooks themselves.

ME How do you come across some of the older material? When you find it, how do you decide what to eventually publish?

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There are always things in the back of our minds that we would like to do, circumstances permitting. A lot of it comes, in my case, from having been an intern at Printed Matter and being exposed to some really amazing publications that might have been available there and in a handful of other places, but weren't or aren't really getting attention. Then, a lot of the time, when you start researching one aspect of an artist's work, you come across publications whose existence you may not have been aware of earlier. Otherwise it's through recommendations from our peers. We are really fortunate to be part of a community that wants to see historical materials re-circulate as much as we do. One example of something from our wish list that came to fruition was Carl Andre's *Quincy*, which we recently reissued as a facsimile edition. *Avalanche* is another example. When we first started Primary Information, *Avalanche* was on a lot of publishers' wish lists. These projects can end up being a one to two-year process, mainly because of permissions, labor, and making sure the timing works best for the artists. I think that Andre was super excited about the possibility of having *Quincy* come out in advance of the Dia show.



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ME That was another question that I had. Say you have this wish list and you approach someone telling them how excited you would be to bring this historical material or ephemera back into the world. Are people always willing to do that or is there ever resistance from artists—“This is almost 50 years old” or whatever—are people always willing to put their work out there again?

MK We have been really fortunate that artists seem very willing to work with us. At the beginning it was sometimes a little difficult because we didn't have a lot of publications to show people. It does happen from time to time, though. We did approach somebody to work on creating a new edition of an artist's book he had done and he was concerned that after so many years, the materials have changed, paper has really changed, and that maybe the book wouldn't be what he would want it to be. That's pretty rare, though. The reason some things stay on the wish list is that we know there may be issues like that.

ME Do you think there is a connection between the archival projects you do, the earliest examples of which date from the 1960s, and the really new stuff? In my mind, even though they do sort of fit together, there is such a huge historical or stylistic gap between, say, the Florian Hecker book, which is technologically savvy and fairly polished, and the Fluxus-oriented material, which is playfully crude.

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conversation with them. It is a big jump from the 1960s to 2013 Hecker, historically speaking, but we also have Dan Graham's music writings in there—writings from throughout his career. Or *REALLIFE Magazine*, which traces the rise of Pictures and post-Pictures Generation artists through the '80s and into the early '90s. People often associate us with work from the '60s and '70s, but we don't see ourselves as particularly tied to that era.

ME You started out doing only the facsimiles and the historical material. What made you want to start working on contemporary stuff?

MK It was always our desire to do the contemporary stuff, but at the time we felt that artists' books weren't so popular. Then, if you were a younger artist trying to develop your career, you were taught that your goal should be to have a gallery, to have an exhibition. There are so many galleries in New York these days that it seems like an attainable goal. I think a lot of artists didn't necessarily feel that an artist's book could be an outlet for them, the way an exhibition is. There weren't a lot of examples of their peers making that work. So we felt like if we reintroduced some of the artists' books that we did it would mean that young people could have access to this material that they had only read about, that they could start thinking about their own projects in this mode. I think that a lot of young artists do have the idea of an artist's book in the back of their minds but they maybe don't realize it (*laughter*).

ME Some of the books are all image-based, so

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media over any other. A lot of artists collect images, collect things in notebooks, collect things on their computer, and these things often relate so strongly to the work that is exhibited, but go unseen. Lutz Bacher's book *Do You Love Me?* is full of transcripts of this ongoing project that she has, which I'm not sure if people fully understand because they may only see one video from the series. When you look at the book, you see the interviews are not as much about Bacher as you may have expected but the images are very personal at times. What interests us is whatever format will benefit the artist, rather than just a catalog. There are so many publishers and galleries that are happy to produce a catalog, but a catalog doesn't provide a firsthand encounter with the artwork.

ME Like many publishers who focus on artists' books, Primary Information understands that books have potential to be an exhibition space or a curatorial space. But you guys are also organizing exhibitions in institutions like White Columns.

MK We do it from time to time, when we are invited to. Books and projects that can be distributed in larger editions are really our focus, though, and we do think they function as a wider exhibition. We don't say yes to every exhibition opportunity that is presented to us because our priority is to reach an audience outside of any one city. In the case of this White Columns show, we had done an Annual with them before, in 2009, and working with them is really great, so when they invited us to present something with them, we thought it would be a great opportunity to give the artists behind *ALBUM*, v

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ME So it's really about access primarily, right?

MK Yes. We don't need to do an exhibition of work from another era that another curator can do. I think that we're drawn to things that don't always work in a gallery space. And with *ALBUM*, here are two artists, Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveen, who have their own practices but have worked collaboratively over the years on magazines that are pages and pages of collages. I think it's easy to take for granted that the collages might have a life elsewhere, beyond the magazines. So it's a nice chance to present them in a gallery and show what goes into making these magazines.

ME You did a show at the ICA in Philadelphia last year and that had more of a historical approach, right? You were going into their archives to pull things out for the exhibition?

MK Right. The ICA was celebrating their anniversary with this program called Excursus, curated by Alex Klein. She invited different people and organizations to study the ICA archives and present material relating to the projects the different curators were working on. It was a way to both celebrate ICA's history and get fresh eyes to focus on their archives. We spent a lot of time in Philadelphia working with them. It's really nice when people approach us with a project that is open-ended in that way. In 1975, the ICA had a very important video art exhibition that really was ahead of its time, embracing a format that a lot of institutions were afraid of. Looking at the research they did to put this exhibition together, and loo

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publicly available. Institutions don't have the budget or time to reissue catalogs—that's really not their priority—so we were able to make these catalogs available for free on their website. Then we also invited Sarah Crowner, an artist we had done a book with, to come down, and she installed a kind of curtain/stage installation that served as a backdrop for the events and programming that we did.

ME I actually wanted to ask you about the PDFs because I feel like they're really interesting and might be overlooked in what Primary Information does. What is the function of them in the scope of what you guys publish? It's obviously cheap—or free basically—to put them out. There is also more practical ephemera—catalogs, manifestos, pamphlets, contracts, newsletters—among the PDFs than in the rest of the catalog. As a resource, do you know how many people might be looking at them?

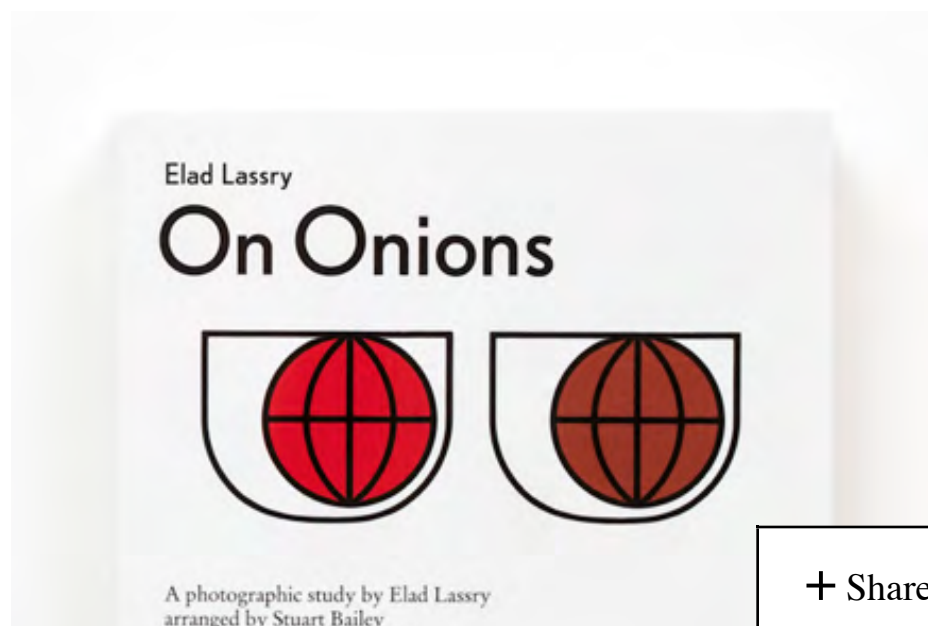
MK (*Laughter*) I'm not the most tech savvy person in our small organization, but in 2008 we did a project with PS1 as part of their *That Was Then, This Is Now* exhibition. We did an installation of Art Workers Coalition material that we culled from MoMA's library, private collections, artists, and from the Whitney's library—lots of protest documents, photographs, and ephemera. We wanted to have an online component as well and we approached Seth Siegelau, asking if it would be possible to post his "The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sales Agreement" on our website so that people could download it and use it. We also put up Art Work *Hearing and Documents* on the website as well

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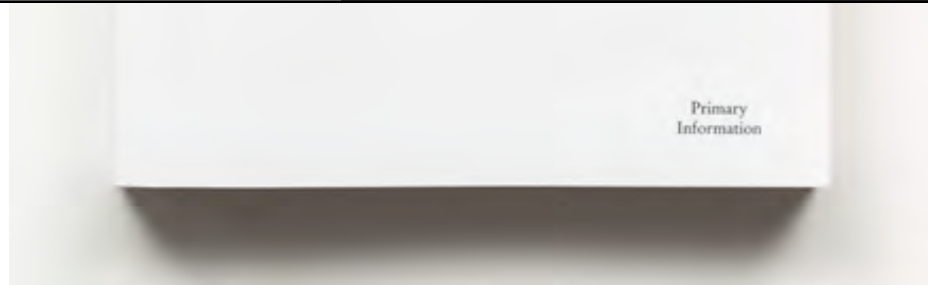
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in different languages and for reasons that we haven't quite been able to figure out, the contract is really popular in Italy, or in the Italian language. When we told Siegel about how popular this material was online, he was really excited and asked us if we would be interested in publishing his publications on our site as PDFs. He had no interest in re-publishing them as books but he was really enthused by the prospect of an audience that might discover this material by just searching the internet, looking for information. Based on the strength of the download numbers, we wanted to pursue the PDF format. Also certain publications may not sell well as books but are great research tools as free PDFs. Another thing that developed out of the expansion of our online resources was a partnership with Ubuweb, which is such a huge resource for us and our peers. The idea is that if we're going to make it available on the internet, let's really spread it.

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ME Do you have any thoughts about digital artists' books? Is that something that Primary Information would ever pursue?

MK We haven't yet. I'm not anti-e-book at all. I think that Badlands Unlimited and Klaus Gallery are making e-books in a smart way, approaching artists whose work might lend itself to that format. I was really excited about e-books when they first developed, but am a little bit less so now, when you can see that the prices aren't that much cheaper than buying a physical book. I'll be waiting to see if it's really a good alternative but it seems like if the prices stay the same—and I haven't done enough research into this, whether Kindle growth is expanding or if it's stabilized. If we talk to an artist who has an idea that works as an e-book, we'd want to do it. Our books are sold on Amazon. And we encourage people who couldn't afford our books otherwise to buy them cheaply from Amazon. If that's their opportunity to get the book affordably, then in spite of Amazon's problems, it works within our model.

ME It seems like you guys are working along the lines of the publishing model of—and I don't want to keep bringing up the '60s—Something Else Press or

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~~different time for books. Books were your access point for~~
 all aspects of culture. For us, our target audience isn't collectors who are dominating so many other parts of the art world. It's our peers: artists, students, historians. I don't think that books are meant to sit on somebody's coffee table and never be read. I think that they're meant to be consumed and lent to other people.

ME Right. It's so insane to think that a Dieter Roth pamphlet from Great Bear or a Daniel Spoerri book would have once been in a supermarket display rack!

MK I know. I remember when I was a kid my supermarket only had romance novels.

ME Maybe you guys should look into that, selling Primary Information in grocery stores...

MK I would love to! Last year, Petrella's Imports had a newsstand on Canal Street where they sold books. Recently, we are seeing more and more peers getting interested in publishing. I don't know all of the reasons why.

ME I wanted to actually ask you about the "state of things" in art publishing because you two have been doing this for almost ten years, which is kind of a long time.

MK That's crazy. Oh man. Wow. I didn't realize that!

ME Do you think things have changed? When you started doing this, maybe there wasn't enough attention to artists' books or they maybe weren't as accessible

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MK I can only speak in terms of the US, because I wasn't spending much time in Europe in 2006 when we started, I was just looking at European publishers. It does seem like artists' books or zines—and I don't think we really need to distinguish those categories, so I'll just say artists' books—have become more popular over the past few years than when I was starting out. When you visit the New York Art Book Fair, you encounter so many artists that you'd see at biennials or, sadly, art fairs. Publishing is just another tool for artists but one that avoids some of the more complicated aspects of the art world like the gallery context or the market.

ME Are there other publishers that you consider peers? Are there places doing work now that's especially exciting?

MK When we started, there were peers like A.R.T. Press. In subsequent years, people like Badlands, who I really like, came along. It's interesting because everyone has a different focus or goal. Part of establishing ourselves as a non-profit had to do with these goals that it would be difficult for a for-profit publisher to attain: to print large editions and have wide distribution, which means losing profit, and to keep prices as low as possible. It's hard to think of others working with those restrictions, but I think there are a lot of smaller publishers who are making great books in smaller editions, producing them both quickly and really nicely.

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Matthew Erickson's writing has appeared in The Believer, Parkett, The Los Angeles Review of Books, Frieze, The Wire, and elsewhere.

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