

What's at Stake?

"We are a sub-sector of artist-run culture, not of the publishing industry.... The thing we share is a passion for audacious, educational, and accessible art publishing in all its forms. Relentlessly resourceful and productive, we are a source of innovation for publishing in this country and beyond. Our work plays an essential role in advancing critical discourse and documentation of contemporary art in Canada."

by Anne Bertrand

—
Quotes opposite:
Gina Badger, notes taken at
the meeting of the TXT–Canadian
Art Publishing Network
Meeting, November 7-8, 2014,
Artexte, Montréal.

OUR TITLE, *The Grey Guide to Artist-Run Publishing and Circulation* refers to the not-so-familiar category of "grey literature," a mode of text-based cultural production common to our organizations/institutions. This category includes reference works, manuals, curatorial essays, directories, ephemera, grant applications, reports—works that often look inward upon the organization that produces them and that reside and circulate mostly outside the better known commercial and academic publishing and distribution channels. Furthermore, the title *Grey Guide* refers to the grey areas arising from an ongoing negotiation between owners and users of copyrighted content in the digital age with the result, we hope, of bringing greater nuance to an otherwise polarizing discussion. In this awareness, the *Grey Guide* focuses upon distribution as a key concern for publishing within artist-run culture, alongside complex issues like conditions of production, copyright and fair dealing, and ethical protocols arising from within a community of practice. A section on resources offers practical guidelines, a lexicon of publishing terms, and links to other reference documents of interest to artist-run centres (ARCs) that wish to support publishing in all its forms as part of their activities. The *Grey Guide* not only investigates why we publish, how and for whom, it serves as a reminder

that most makers of books in the visual arts wrestle with decisions at every step of their production, whether financial, material, ethical, or aesthetic.

Artist-run centres represent the interests of artists, critics, cultural workers and administrators working in relation to artist-run culture. Artist-run centres publish when artists choose to use the book, or related digital forms, as an artistic medium. Artist-run centres also publish in order to document exhibitions, producing pamphlets or didactic materials before or at the time of the exhibition, which can include short curatorial or creative essays. Less and less, artist-run centres produce anthologies including well-researched texts that reflect upon common themes arising throughout the past programming year. Artist-led publishing can take place through an artist-run centre, but also occurs in other institutional and para-institutional contexts.

The material forms assumed by artist-led publishing change as artists and their institutions seek new, agile and adaptive modes of dissemination. Such shifts in modes of address are responses, in part, to the pressures of chronic financial instability combined with a sincere desire to engage with the world outside

of the physical gallery space. Among these agile forms, the book represents an ideal for communicating concepts to the public through text and images: easy to share through digital editions, easy to ship (despite rising shipping costs), easy to exchange online or hand-to-hand. The circulation of publications is valued in artist-run culture for its potential to generate social relations, creating new publics over time. The seemingly unlimited potential for dissemination promised by digital formats often assumes that once produced (often as a labour of love), our publications will continue to be cared for by readers and collecting institutions, rather than left to linger in brick-and-mortar storage or fester, thanks to link rot, somewhere on a cloud server.

ART PUBLISHING AS A DISTINCT SUB-SECTOR OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

ARCA and RCAAQ hired Felicity Tayler as a contributing editor for the *Grey Guide* because of her unique combination of experience as an artist, critic, cultural worker and art librarian. Tayler also recently completed her doctoral thesis, titled *Conceptual Nationalisms: Conceptual Book-works, Countercultural Imaginaries and the Neo-Avant-Garde*

in Canada and Québec, 1967–1974. The guide therefore benefits from art-historical grounding, as well as a practical understanding of the information systems that form the infrastructure of a future-oriented digital culture. Tayler's discussion of theoretical issues around copyright and intellectual property are not to be construed as legal advice; rather, they outline some basic principles. Tayler's tasks began with reviewing notes taken at various meetings of an *ad hoc* committee of independent publishers from Québec and Canada (see below for a full list of these meetings). She quickly realized that the content of the *Grey Guide* would have to respond to the concerns raised in these community-initiated meetings. Taking these concerns as a starting point helped to orient the focus of this guide toward addressing challenges related to distribution, rather than the materiality or production of publications *per se*. The quotes that introduce each brief are taken from the meeting minutes and capture the voices of participants keen to share their experiences of art publishing. These voices emphasize the fundamental role that discourse plays in the reception of contemporary art, as exhibitions are now frequently accompanied by texts that act as entry points to understanding the work—or, conversely, produce a veil of muted

meaning. Overall, participants agreed the resources required for effective international circulation of publicity and publications are grossly underestimated. While some art publishers continue to enjoy the services of commercial distribution, most must rely on proactive self-distribution.

Tayler sets the tone for the *Guide* in “What Is a Public, What Is Publicity?” Offering a set of definitions to help artist-led publishers think about how the act of publication creates performative effects; that is, making books, blogs and other textual ephemera can create a sense of belonging among disparate readers, potentially bringing new modes of social relations into being. Because each publisher's situation is unique—every organization is a distinct amalgam of institutional histories, mandate, governance, finances, stakeholders, and so on—no one model of publishing can be conceived, proposed, or promoted as a general “solution” for all organizations that participate in artist-run culture. In this essay, Tayler also introduces a faceted taxonomy of book forms typically used in art publishing. The idea is to show how the aesthetic choice of form is critical to attracting a public and to facilitating circulation through atypical trade routes. When shown an earlier draft of

this taxonomy of publishing forms and genres, artist Robin Metcalfe reflected upon the slipperiness of classification in a field that values hybrid publications that combine aspects of artists' books and exhibition catalogues:

The format for these is conceptually important, and directly involves the artist; these function only partly, if at all, as exhibition documentation in the usual sense, but might rather be considered a distinct publishing project that runs parallel to the exhibition. The emphasis may be on the aesthetic and material aspects (close to the artist's bookwork end of the spectrum) or on discursive aspects (critical, historical, parallel creative texts, etc.), lying closer to the monograph. (Robin Metcalfe, personal communication, October 6, 2015)

"From Dissemination to Circulation" emphasizes the active role that the publisher must play to ensure a connection with immediate and long-term readerships, whether this publisher is an artist-run centre, an independent small press, or the authors/artists themselves. Where "dissemination," a term often used in cultural policy, implies the wide spread of information without feedback from an audience, the term "circulation" acknowledges that publics enjoy agency

within the networked processes by which art publications travel and gain influence. The near absence of commercial distribution in this field has economic and social consequences, which are outlined by Esther Vincent, of Marginal Distribution in an excerpt from the conference proceedings of *Off Printing/Tiré à part* reproduced after the essay.

"Material Conditions" addresses the economics of writing and publishing as activities complementary to a visual art practice. Publishing in the visual arts is often articulated in terms of diminishing resources. Indeed, ARCA's research on the evolution of art-publication funding at the Canada Council for the Arts (2014) confirmed a diminishing eligibility for artist-run publishing projects over the past thirty years, with the exception of magazines (magazine funding has its own, internal challenges that will not be addressed in this guide). However, in a prior meeting of the *ad hoc* committee, an ARCA member expressed the conundrum differently, observing that relatively speaking, artist-run culture has access to "an incredible amount of resources, historical experience, knowledge; a solid network is in place, foundation firmly laid with designers, copy editors, printers, as well as

a long-standing relationship with the writing community." Whatever the future brings, public funding remains critical to producing publications that cannot compete within the free-market economic model driving the processes of globalization. Author and literary historian Frank Davey's essay "Economics and the Writer," reproduced with the essay, argues that the need for public subsidies is a historical and structural problem:

These opportunities have been supported by a network of social and government commitments—at both federal and provincial levels—that underscore a belief that Canada's cultural industries are too important—and too fragile—to be left to the whims of the global marketplace. (Frank Davey, p. 113)

"Moral and Legislative Economies of Artist-Run Publishing" reflects upon why there is a growing movement to explicitly recognize artist-run publishing as a public good, a dematerialized art object, a practice of community building, of knowledge sharing, or as a "gift" to readers. This essay proposes that artist-run publishing is presently responding to a legislative environment in which creative activity is defined as an economic resource, that is, as intellectual property,

which necessitates an oppositional relationship between copyright owners and copyright users. Within artist-run culture, the legislative frameworks of intellectual property law and related public funding policies are increasingly perceived to restrict or shut down cultural exchange—further disillusionment sets in as artists struggle to make a living.

The following essay, "Copyright as a Practice of Daily Life for Artists and Artist-Run Publishers" gives an overview of the mechanisms currently in place to ensure the compensation of artists for the use of their intellectual property. Conflicts arise when the cut-copy-and-paste logic, dialogic, pluralistic and participatory ideals of digital culture mean that the identity of an individual or publishing organization frequently oscillates between being the owner and the user of copyrighted content.

"Situating Artist-Run Publishing within Digital Culture" outlines the concept of the "public domain" as both a legal category and a symbolic battleground where international intellectual property law is contested by post-national "free culture" movements, which do not identify with social and economic inequalities arising from the restriction of cultural expression in a networked society. There are

parallels between the counter-publics attracted to artist-run publishing and to those arising within digital culture, such as those drawn to the open access, open source and Creative Commons movements.

“Resources and Resourcefulness” presents a “good enough” suite of practical tools, including a glossary of art publishing terms, which gives an idea of the resources required at various stages of production for print-based publications. An important, often overlooked component of these initiatives is the publicity required to ensure long-term circulation of publications needed to attract diverse niche publics. A sample checklist is provided so that artist-run publishers can make informed decisions from the outset about the form their publishing project will take, allowing them to carry out a project of any scope with more confidence.

“The Post-Digital Now” proposes advocacy avenues like the development of a writing fee schedule and support for non-literary, creative non-fiction translation, to further recognize art publishing as a distinct artistic form. More importantly, artists need to continue exploring alternative forms of publicity, such as by unleashing the potential of open access in the post-digital era, beyond the

cross-platform digital media and print circulation model employed in this guide. The authors hope that the *Grey Guide* may lend practitioners a better understanding of the nuanced situation in this field of activity, and of our own agency in negotiating usage and circulation of cultural productions, leading thereby, we hope, to less polarized positions.

SO, WHAT’S AT STAKE AND WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

This *Guide* seeks to provoke high-level debate about the role of publishing in artist-run culture. Combining theory with practice, The *Grey Guide* also offers practical guidance in this complex field, so that a new generation of artists and cultural workers who wish to professionalize may do so, while others may opt to remain resolutely DIY if they so please. Either way, somewhere on the continuum between adopting an entrepreneurial strategy and advocating for sustained public funding, this guide offers insight into the advantages and disadvantages inherent to a gamut of approaches. ∞

Meetings of an *ad hoc* committee of independent publishers from Québec and Canada began quite organically at the New York Art Book Fair (2008–12).

Leading to:

Unpublished Minutes, *Consultation on Art Books in Canada*, Visual Arts Section, Canada Council for the Arts, June 2012.

Followed by these meetings organized by ARCA:

Art Publishing Forum, *East of There*, Saint John, New Brunswick, June 23, 2013.

ARCA Writing and Independent Publishing Meeting, February 27, 2014, Librairie Formats, Montréal.

TXT—Canadian Art Publishing Network Meeting, November 7–8, 2014, Arttexte, Montréal.

TXT—Canadian Art Publishing Network Meeting, October 16–17, 2015, Or Gallery & VA/BF, Vancouver.

Tangentially related:

Meeting of Emerging and Developing Artist-Run Centres and Organizations, or, The No-Profit Model, The Pacific Association of Artist-Run Centres (PAARC), March 29, 2014, Vancouver.