

CONTEXT IS KING

THE DEMOCRATIC MULTIPLE IN A DIGITAL AGE

Mary Tasillo

Imagine it is 2019, and we humans are faced with a combination of problems that threaten our existence: disease, battles over fuel, a threatened food supply, hacked communications infrastructure, and the growth of nomadic populations due to environmental catastrophes. This scenario is the premise of *Superstruct*,¹ a 6-week long online forecasting game, designed by the Institute for the Future, an independent, nonprofit research and forecasting group based in Palo Alto, California, to imagine constructive solutions to a threatening future. What role does the artist's book play in this in this imagined future world? I'll return to this.

The democratic multiple had its heyday and defined what "artist book" meant in the 1960s and early 1970s, according to histories of the field², fitting for the contemporaneous spirit of political activism.

The idea of the democratic multiple is that one produces hundreds or thousands of copies of a work that are available cheaply or for free, removing economic and access barriers to art and information. This definition is not without its problems, but will suffice to put us on the same page. To me, the democratic multiple suggests an art practice that is about communicating, and ideally communicating with more than an elite audience, well versed in the realm of fine arts.

In the wake of the earlier heyday of the democratic multiple, artist-critics such as Lucy Lippard and Johanna Drucker have commented on the *myth* of the democratic multiple³. Lippard points out that making a book materially available bears no connection to the accessibility of its content⁴. We often use the term "democratic multiple" to describe the material conditions of a work—the availability of it and the price tag attached to it. And the exact figures that define "democratic" to any given person are clearly a sliding scale. Sure, a \$50 piece of art that exists in 100 copies is more accessible than the \$5,000 one-of-a-kind. But democracy in its truest form is accessible to everyone. In a true democracy, the incarcerated can vote and a citizen needn't pay \$80 for federal identification in order to have their say as recent federal ID requirements in Indiana, the strictest in the United States, mandate⁵.

All too often we overlook the roles of both content and reader experience in our assessment of the

democratic multiple. You might print an open edition of works that you distribute for free; everyone can have one. But if the content is impenetrable to anyone who doesn't like conceptual art games or Dada narratives, then you've killed whatever democracy you've built into the project. You can do away with the poll tax, but if the ballot requires a law degree to read and understand, a lot of votes get tossed out—or, moreover, most people lose interest in voting.

It would appear that the idea of the democratic multiple has fallen out of favor with the greater part of the book art world. Going back to Clifton Meador's definition of book arts from a pedagogical perspective, as put forth at the 9th Biennial Pyramid Atlantic Book Arts Conference and Fair in 2006 and subsequently published in *The Bonefolder*⁶, contemporary book arts is defined by its ties to letterpress and a wide range of binding structures. One might, as Meador does, distinguish artists' books from book art by the producer's approach to content, but they remain complicit in this craft-based and technologically determined approach to categorization.

Is it any wonder, then, that the democratic multiple has gone by the wayside in a world of shifting technologies? If you want your book to proliferate, a book can be digitally printed from the corner of a studio apartment or sent to the nearest copy shop from a cafe with free wireless. Print-on-demand self-publishing has taken off, though maligned by some segments of the book arts community. Moreover, some content has migrated to the web as content creation has become an inherent part of how we approach the internet in an era of blogs and social networking sites.

Economic considerations can limit production, and it seems realistic to expect that a democratic multiple will most generally not come in forms that are more labor intensive. That is to say while it might be aesthetically compelling, it is unlikely—though it can happen—that an artist will spend the time and resources needed to letterpress print a book that should sell for five dollars, or to construct two-hundred flexagons to give away, unless the project is generously grant funded. Artists, particularly those devoted to the democratic multiple—arguably anyone foolish enough to enter the financially impractical field of making books—would like to be

outside the realm of capital. We are all faced with the need to eat, however, and well past the days of true patronage.

But there is a profusion of cheap mass publication going on. It is just that most of it is off the radar of the book arts community, and contextualized within the realm of zines, periodicals, or photo publications. One exception of note is some of the work at the New York Art Book Fair of October 2008, and the associated conference organized by ARLIS NY, where many presses produced (relatively) cheap, open editions in the fifteen to fifty dollar range with the book often being viewed as curatorial space. The battle for the title "artist book" has many fronts, most of which address craft in some form or another. When discussing the democratic multiple within book arts, does one include zines, which generally make notably less of craft than does the book arts world? What about political tracts? When I turn from examining craft to narrative focus, I am unable to distinguish between zines and artists' books. In evaluating these works, I seek to evaluate work based upon narrative and visual qualities, the turn of the page, and the type of interaction between the work and the reader. This interaction between work and viewer inevitably involves models of distribution, which can follow a straight capitalist model: the producer makes and sells while the reader buys and then consumes. Or the work can be distributed within a context of other types of exchange. Given other modes of exchange, need we identify the democratic multiple as open edition work, as Clive Philpott does⁷, or might less in fact be more in our media-saturated society? Does the mode of the democratic multiple tie to the ideas inherent in the project, and how might one creatively interpret the concept of democratic multiple to encourage engagement and dialogue, reaching people rather than page counts?

Johanna Drucker, in *The Century of Artists' Books*, refers to the Lettrists as publishing to promote an aesthetic agenda⁸. Similarly, there are many publications coming out of skating and graffiti culture, as well as out of fine art galleries, many of which either remain in the realm of photo book, failing to make use of the book's structure to introduce a narrative or overarching idea beyond the collection of the images, or which seem to be accessible in the interest not of disseminating an idea or narrative experience, but in disseminating the artist's own brand, as it were. Rob Walker, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2006, discusses young contemporary artists creating alternative brands in the spirit of "if you can't beat em, join em" capital.⁹ In that sense, many practitioners of the multiple seem to have embraced the language of advertising—the ultimate exemplar, and perhaps evil twin, of the democratic multiple—to disseminate one's aesthetic projects, whether the art occupies the space of a screenprint, a skateboard, a t-shirt, or a book. In this sense, perhaps the mode of democratic multiple is perfectly wed to the content of disseminating an artist's brand/aesthetic agenda/logo.

This goal is perfectly suited to the self-promotional aspects of social networking sites in the Web 2.0 era. However, I find it perfectly depressing for artists to stop there; is there aesthetic or social commentary, a narrative or political mission, that justifies disseminating the work so widely, propagating an idea rather than a brand identity?

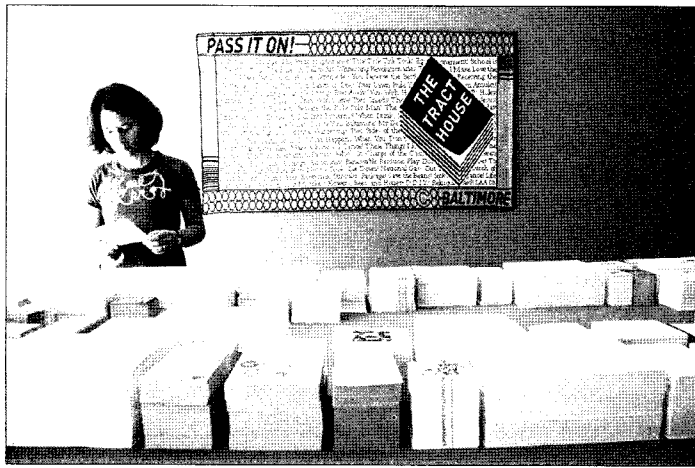
In her essay, "The Dilemma," Lucy Lippard states: "[If] an artist (like anyone else) considers his time and money spent more valuably at parties or bars than working for social change, that is clearly his choice. But given the fate of artists in totalitarian societies, it would seem in his interest to use that time more wisely."¹⁰

Much has been made in recent years about the way the Internet has revolutionized American politics, particularly national election campaigns. In the past year we have witnessed a wide and active political engagement that I have not seen in my adult life. Carrying or displaying any Obama paraphernalia in downtown Philadelphia in the summer of 2008 inevitably resulted in being approached on the street by someone who was interested in getting involved in the campaign. So what does electoral activism look like in the urgency following eight years of an egregiously failed Bush presidency? Does it look like the internet? To be sure, my e-mail has been flooded with requests for donations; calls to volunteer; links to political YouTube videos; and invitations to debate-watching parties; Barack-the-Vote on Facebook. However, we live in the midst of a strong digital divide, and when it comes to the nitty gritty of getting out the vote, grassroots organizing still means knocking on doors, roaming the streets asking people if they are registered, and handing out buttons, yard signs, and informational broadsides.

In other words, if you want to reach people, in the broadest sense, the printed page still holds sway. And narrative, a form closely tied to book format, is a powerful force and tool. For instance, I was in the Convention Center Marriot Hotel this summer in Philadelphia during a trial lawyer's conference (that is another story, courtesy of the starving artist), and a gentleman who was somewhat conspicuously not wearing a suit came through, handing out information about the egregious unfairness his sister had experienced—something about discrimination on the job and her name not appearing on the ballot during a City Council run, these being the book ends for a small list of other items. He was seeking to get this story to the trial lawyers, and I wasn't surprised to see he was asked to leave the convention hotel. He wondered, however, "if you can't have free speech in the Marriot, then where can you find it?" Personally, a convention center hotel privately owned by a large corporation is not the first place I would go looking for freedom of speech. However, this was far from the guy's biggest problem. I took a look at the information he'd handed out. It was about three pages, photocopied, with somewhat unfortunate design and moreover, an entirely incoherent narrative. His print

materials didn't give me any clearer a sense of what the job discrimination had to do with the City Council ballot or what sort of outcome these folks were seeking from disseminating this information. I'm a sucker for social justice; with a cogent narrative, I would have been won over. But without the power of narrative, this guy unfortunately remained in the whack-job category.

While the democratic multiple is at the heart of political pamphlets, they can be the easiest multiples to ignore, their explicitly didactic intent making them seem at times more like bad textbooks than as vehicles for distributing textual and visual information across pages. They occupy notable shelf space of infoshops and radical bookstores alongside more clearly artistic zines and periodicals, but they often gather dust due, I would surmise, to their lack of color, graphics, and catchy titles. Artists such as Hans Haacke have utilized the tract format as a way to bring together political dissemination with artistic practice. Artist Lisa Anne Auerbach has



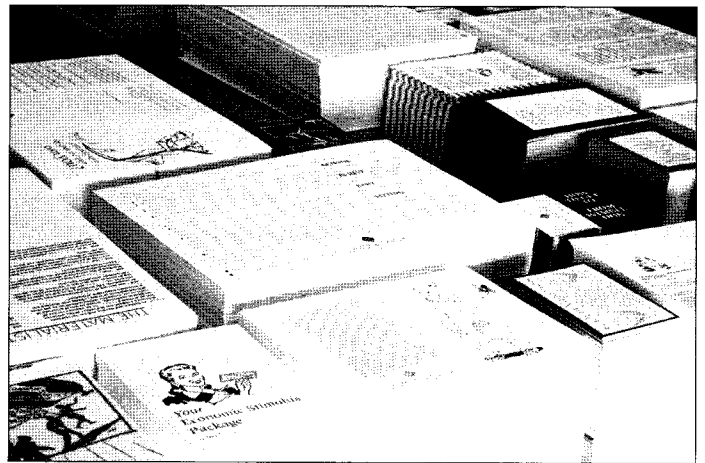
Lisa Anne Auerbach's Tract House, The Contemporary Museum, 2008
(photo: Lisa Anne Auerbach)

taken this practice a step further in her project Tract House, carried out this past year in conjunction with a show at the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore.¹¹

Auerbach did not treat the tract as a way to disseminate her own ideas, nor those of established literature (see *The Bible*, or the *Communist Manifesto*). She utilized the resources at her disposal as an artist—not insignificantly the funding from the Contemporary Museum—to establish an environment to print and distribute the ideas of others. She solicited a variety of tracts from friends, neighbors and strangers. She then had graphic designer Roman Jaster redesign each one, and 1000 copies of each were printed (as many as the artist could afford). Auerbach did little editing, and she made the tracts available in a temporary storefront space, where they were laid out in stacks on the table and available for visitors to take away. The tracts continue to be available as free pdf downloads on the web. Here, the role of artist is that of the facilitator, using what capital

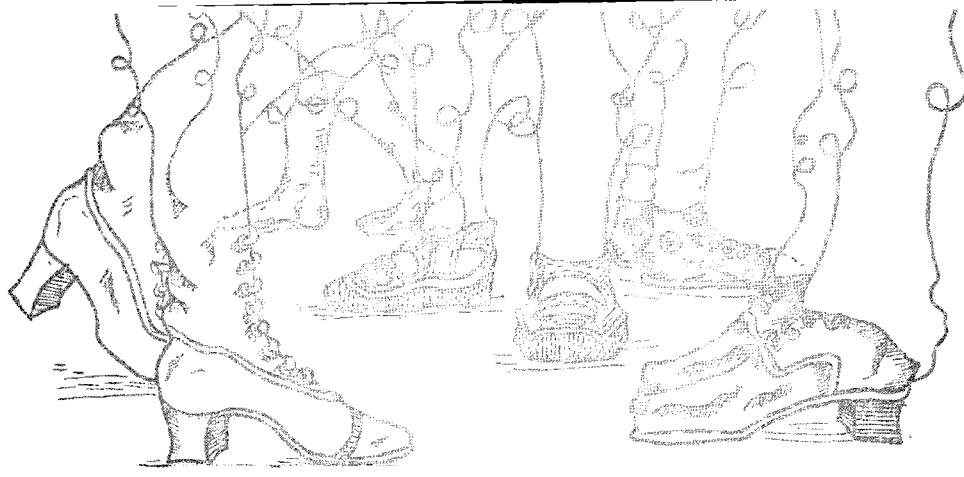
is at her disposal to give voice to other citizens and encourage dialogue—an information age Robin Hood if you will.

Kinship Circle Poems: something beautiful for free is a project undertaken by Regula Russelle and CB Sherlock to reach out with their art to the greater community of Minneapolis-St. Paul. They created an unbound book of ten folios, each a visual response to a suite of poems on “kinship circle, improvisation, a sense of ‘we.’”¹² These prints, while forming a community book when put together, each stand on their own and Russelle and Sherlock distributed a total of 4,500 letterpress printed keepsakes, over three weeks in September 2008. The project was funded by a grant through the Minnesota Center for Book Arts and the Jerome Foundation. As it turned out, their timing followed the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, clearly a contentious event to have in the community. Their goal, as the project title suggests, was to share something beautiful for free. These folios



were handed out at farmers' markets, public transit stops, outside community centers, and other urban locations. Russelle states, “we learned right away that most people read the poems on the spot, and that many were delighted to take an extra copy to pass along to a friend, or someone at work. Some people ran after us to thank us, others shook our hands. We felt like street musicians without the money box.”¹³

In another use of the unbound book, print and book artist Joseph Lappie has been producing a monthly print-by-mail subscription service for the past couple of years. These prints were initially individual and not part of a narrative as such, but then became more connected, both visually and thematically. The prints make an argument for social justice through a fictional first-person narrative from the perspective of society's forgotten and overlooked—or perhaps the voice of the city itself. This bearing witness can be shared widely as the prints, through the subscription, are inexpensive at less than two dollars each. Furthermore, the newest prints engage the subscriber in the process as the narrative builds.



There is no one here who tries to help me anymore. To their credit, they did in the beginning... all of them. It is an amazing display of unity. An emotionally draining togetherness that I can be proud to say I am responsible for. Of course it only lasts for moments. (Or what seems later to be moments.) Eventually they see each other as disparate individuals and back off. Their eyes open to the difference that are simply too similar, too much.

Such such untidy unity. The local authorities are called; then the county; then the state; then the country; then the world. Mystical, magical, oh-so-holy women and men flock to the scene, attempting to decipher the sign. Their believers swell. I only judge them by their shoes and voices. From where I lay it seems culturally representational.

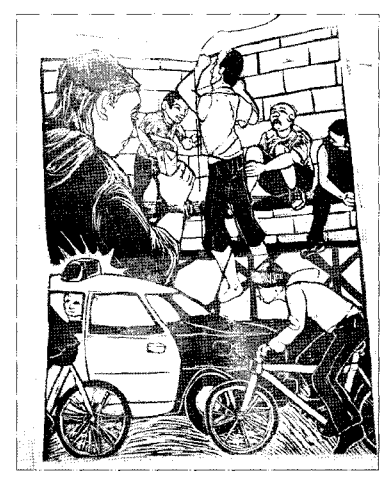
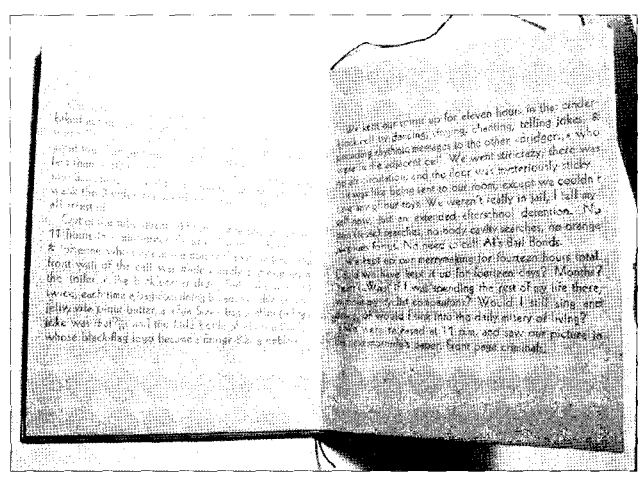
I proceed to present them with my most positive wriggle.

Postcard from Joseph Lappie's print subscription (photo: Mary Tasillo)

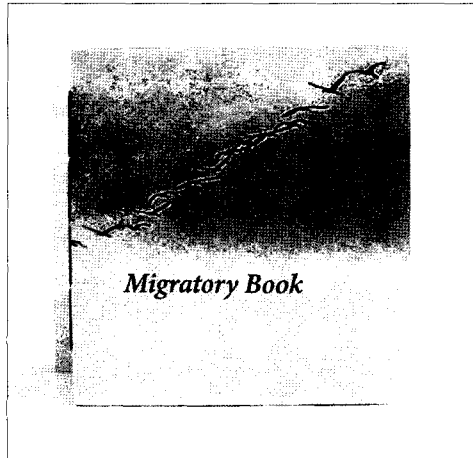
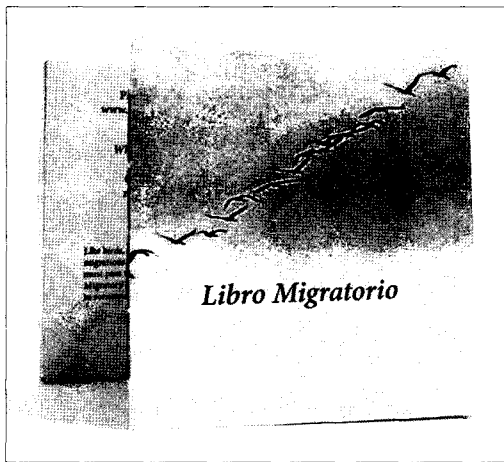
Each month's print is a new, numbered page in a book, which the subscriber will be encouraged to bind. The viewer becomes an active participant in this observation through literally stringing together the pieces of the story, and perhaps stitching up the casualties as well. In both the veins of personal narrative and two-dollar art, Karen Switzer has been producing *Ker-bloom!* for over a decade. Switzer, like Lappie, uses publication as a way of bearing witness, though while Lappie's work puts fiction to work, Switzer relies on her direct experience. To quote Switzer's description of the project:

*Each issue contains a personal essay that relates an event or situation (from epic to banal and everything in between) and how it relates to the bigger picture. So, there's usually some topic that's pretty evident by reading the story, and an underlying socio-political theme to think about. Topics over the past eleven years include: bicycles, love lost, substitute teaching, zine conferences, cancer, anarchism, and domestic violence.*¹⁴

Text is handset and the zine is letterpress printed bimonthly in an edition of several hundred, and each issue is sold individually for two dollars, thus accessible to anyone who can buy the occasional cup of coffee (and cheaper than a chai). These zines are primarily text-based, but their simple structure, small size, and short length keep them to an amount of information that can be read in a short time. Some of the issues have been bound together in chronological or thematic sets, such as a set of zines from protests—a topic that clearly demonstrates an activist function of the project. *Ker-bloom!* tells an alternative story, bearing witness to political actions and events that either did not receive media coverage, or received media coverage that was horribly skewed. The format for these works is affordable, well-designed, portable, and, compared to digital documentation, less traceable—something of concern to activists.



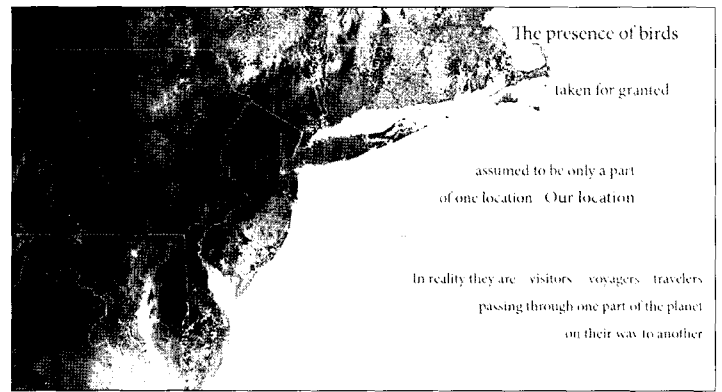
Ker-bloom! #14, by Karen Switzer (photo: Mary Tasillo)



Libro Migratorio/ Migratory Book, Covers A & B, Michelle Wilson
(photo: M. Wilson)

On the other hand, Michelle Wilson's *Migratory Books* project relies upon traceability for its success. Wilson freely distributed an edition of two hundred photocopied, pamphlet-stitched books, not only to disseminate a politically infused narrative, but also to encourage discussion among readers through a project blog. The book addresses migration using a poetic text and imagery of birds and the earth. The open-ended aspect of the text, combined with the book's bilingualism (a dos-á-dos structure offers the narrative once in English and once in Spanish) suggests the politics in America surrounding immigration. Moreover, the books are meant to literally enact this movement. The receiver of a book is instructed to read it, contribute a response to the question "what connects us?" to the project's blog,¹⁵ and then pass the book along to someone else. It didn't take long for *Migratory Books* to make it to the other side of the globe, as evidenced by the source of responses on the blog, which serves to track the book as well as being the site of the discussion.

While Wilson's project relies on the globe-trotting aspects of contemporary communities, the Philadelphia-based publication *Megawords*¹⁶ taps into a more localized sense of community in its distribution. Published as a periodical, *Megawords* has a variable format that



Page spread from *Migratory Book/Libro Migratorio* by Michelle Wilson

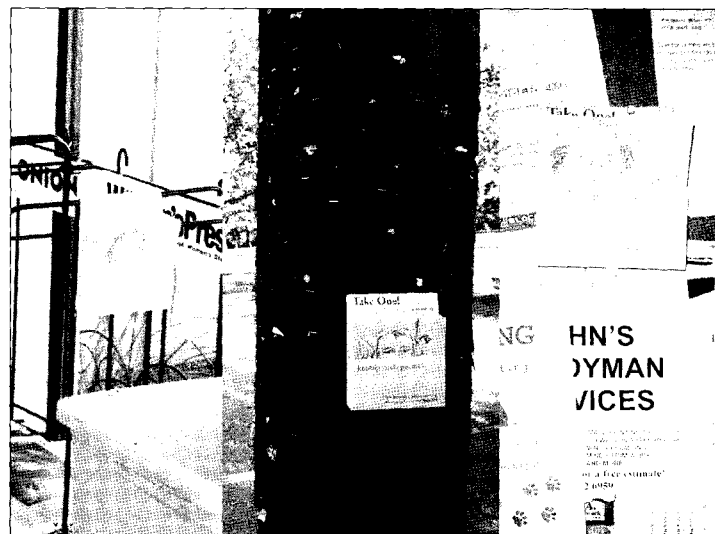
generally relies on *photography* and the occasional essay to evoke a mood, an idea, or a theme that is more than the sum of its parts. The distribution of the publication, as well as the projects and events that are under the *Megawords* umbrella, utilize a range of strategies to reach out to readers. Anthony Smyrski and Daniel Murphy, the artists behind the project, have utilized a combination of grant funding, subscription fees, and out-of-pocket payments to publish print runs of a few thousand, which follow a variety of distribution paths. Issues are left at coffee shops and other public spaces; some are distributed via news boxes on the street, while others are given away at events such as panel discussions or, notably, the recent *Megawords* Storefront that opened in the Chinatown neighborhood of Philadelphia for the duration of September 2008.

The storefront space was devised as a sort of living publication, an outward explosion of Smyrski and Murphy's attempt, through *Megawords* and affiliated projects, to reach out and communicate. With their publication, they have inspired many people to send them unsolicited photos and other documents for their use. In the storefront, they have also succeeded in harnessing the energy of many individuals into an ever-evolving flexible space of changing ephemera and events, including an expanding library of publications. The opening featured the release of *Megawords Issue 10*, and was followed by a jam-packed month of events that brought in a range of audiences, as well as curious passersby, for performances, lectures, and workshops. For example, the West Coast publication *Hamburger Eyes* installed a copy shop in the space, which was put to use as the means of production during a zine-making workshop. As the public was invited to make art and otherwise contribute their own creations to the space, the *Megawords* Storefront functioned to facilitate the creativity of a large local community in a project that was much larger than any two artists could accomplish from their individual visions.

In a more explicitly activist context, Josh MacPhee facilitates public expression through his book work, which serves as both documentation of street art, and as handbook and tool to street artists. MacPhee both



Something Beautiful for Free by Regula Russelle and CB Sherlock, view of folios (photo: Regula Russelle and CB Sherlock)



Something Beautiful for Free by Regula Russelle and CB Sherlock, view of folios (photo: Regula Russelle and CB Sherlock)

collaborates and distributes his work as part of the JustSeeds political art collective.¹⁷

MacPhee's zine *Pound the Pavement* documents existing street art as a way of studying forms of public expression that are outside the realm of mainstream art. This is a form of expression that requires considerable risk on the part of the artist due to prohibitions and pressures against graffiti art, and MacPhee works in this zine to promote street art as a valid and valued form of expression. This documentation takes the form of both photos and essays, with issues structured around a theme, such as street art adhered to lamppost bases.¹⁸

Other collaborative publications such as *Cut & Paint*, co-authored with Nicolas Lampert and Colin Matthes, and *Reproduce and Revolt*, edited with Favianna Rodriguez, reference Dover Publication's collections of copyright free clip art, but go beyond this free supply of images in offering instructions for stenciling, as well as essays about the history of the reproducible political graphic, specific stencil projects, and photo spreads. In other words, these graphics come to the reader with a destination in mind.

MacPhee attempts to disseminate the publications as numerous and as easily as possible, which for him means distribution through the JustSeeds website or through alternative small publishers such as AK Press. While these works don't all fall under my favorite "cheaper than a chai" price

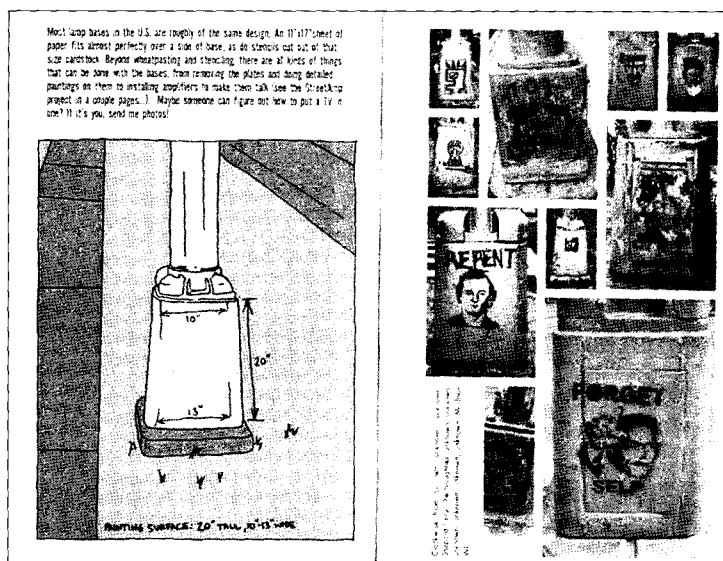
point, they do facilitate the spread of an art form that is free to view, as well as supporting its audience as creators and participants in public discourse.

Ed Ruscha's books and their legacy skewed our vision of the democratic multiple.¹⁹ Context is everything. Sure, the artist book is an elite object, housed in the Special Collections section of the library or viewed in the gallery, but does that mean that we should play exclusively to the bibliophiles? Or, instead, should we use the familiarity of the book format as a springboard from which to connect to our communities? Ruscha described the photographs that comprised his books as "technical data like industrial photography . . . nothing

more than snapshots,"²⁰ meanwhile selling his work through galleries. The projects discussed here offer models where the artist acts as facilitator, conversation partner, witness, storyteller, and coordinator. This model offers alternative modes of exchange outside of spend-and-consume capitalism. Certainly, bartering our art for our audience's interaction does not free us from the economic system within which we live. Indeed to make this viable requires a restructuring of the economics of art—primarily vast increases to arts funding both publicly and

privately. What can you do to make this happen? A diversity of tactics seems like the best bet as seen in the aforementioned examples.

These visions of how the book can function in



Josh MacPhee's *Pound the Pavement* #9, page spread (photo credit: Josh MacPhee)

contemporary society are in line with both activism and interventionist practices in fine art. They offer models for how the artist making books can maintain relevance in not only the present world, but in the world of 2019, to return to Superstruct. Furthermore they call for the consideration of context, environment, and interaction in our critical discussion of book works. In *JAB 23*, Jae Rossman applies Gerard Genette's Paratextual theory to several artists' books.²¹ Most interesting for our discussion here is the idea of epitext—those texts about the work that are not physically attached to the work such as reviews and public discussions. In other words, space already exists within the realm of theory for considering the elements of a book that are external to the pages, and yes, even external to the binding. Context is indeed king.

In the world of 2019, my *Superstruct* counterpart Mary Duplicate is busy teaching bookmaking, printmaking and papermaking at the local level. You can't hack a handmade book. Its power will not fade when the power goes out, nor if your computer is sadly outdated. In an era where many are more attached to their iPod than to where they put their feet, book artists are utilizing the multiple to elicit meaningful interaction amongst friends and strangers, bringing us back to an analog version of community—one which is necessary to our survival as a race.

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NOTES

1 Institute for the Future, *The Superstruct Game*. <http://www.superstructgame.org>.

2 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995). p. 72.
Lucy Lippard, "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books" in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985). p. 50.
Joan Lyons, *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985). p. 7.

3 Johanna Drucker, "The Artist's Book as Democratic Multiple" in *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995). p. 69-91.
Lippard, Lucy. "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books" in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985). p. 50.

4 Lippard, *ibid*.

5 Garrett Epps, "The Voter ID Fraud," *The Nation*. January 28, 2008. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080128/epps>.
Adam Liptak, "Fear but Few Facts in Debate on Voter I.D.'s," *The New York Times*. September 24, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/24/us/24bar.html>

6 Meador, Clifton. 2007. "Disciplining a Craft". *The Bonefolder: an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist* 3(2). p. 3-10.

7 Clive Philpott, "Bound to Please: The Influence of Institutional Collecting on Artists' Books Production," (a panel moderated by Tony White at the Art Libraries Society of New York Artist Book Conference. 25 October 2008. New York, NY, October 25, 2008).

8 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995). p. 71.

9 Rob Walker, "Brand underground," *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 2006.

10 Lucy Lippard, "The Dilemma," in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, ed. Lucy Lippard (New York: Dutton, 1984). p. 8.

11 See <http://www.thetracthouse.com>.

12 Regula Russelle, e-mail to the author, October 23, 2008.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Karen Switzer. <http://www.craftycards.net/projects/index.htm>.

15 <http://migratorybooks.blogspot.com>

16 <http://www.megawordsmagazine.com>

17 <http://www.justseeds.org>

18 Josh MacPhee, *Pound the Pavement #9*.

19 Specifically I refer to Ruscha's apocryphally flagship role in selling his books cheaply and in the thousands, without explicit attention to reader experience or transformation. Ruscha states, "I want absolutely neutral material. My pictures are not that interesting, nor the subject matter" (Coplans, John. Interview. *Artforum* February 1965

20 Betty Bright, *No Longer Innocent: Book Arts in America 1960-1980* (New York: Granary Books, 2005). p. 116.

21 Jae Rossman, "Reading Outside the Lines: Paratextual Analysis and Artists' Books," *JAB: The Journal of Artists' Books* 23 (2008). p. 31-41