

Directions in Art Publishing during Covid-19

by Freya Copeland

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Youvalle Levy and Freya Copeland of Replika Publishing with some of their latest titles in their studio in Neukölln, Berlin, September, 2021. Image: Merve Terzi.



Installation view of *Ellipse* book launch, Berlin, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.



Installation view of *Ellipse* book launch, Berlin, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.



Freya Copeland representing Replika Publishing at Artslibris, Barcelona, 2021. Image: tandem projects.



Replika Publishing at Stockholm Art Book Fair, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Image: Eliska Kovacikova.

As the 2020 pandemic disrupted travel and public events worldwide, the world of artists' book fairs was forced to retreat online, to find new and creative ways of engaging with audiences, artists and publishers. In this piece Freya Copeland, artist, curator and co-founder of Berlin-based independent Replika Publishing, reflects on the history of artists' books and the challenges posed by Covid-19.

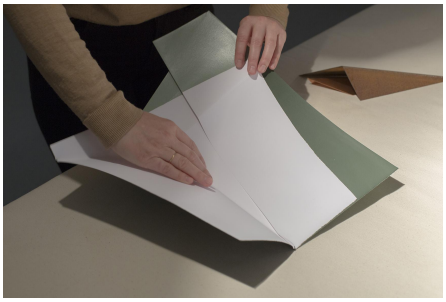
As a do-it-yourself medium that has allowed artists to circumnavigate the art world gatekeepers of major institutions, publishers and the art market, the Covid-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to reevaluate the status and mission of independent artist book publishing. Arriving in Australia for the Melbourne Art Book Fair the very same weekend Covid-19 hit Australia and New Zealand and forced us into lockdown, Copeland was able to reflect on the art book fair circuit she usually attends, and to spend time at home in Auckland absorbing Aotearoa's rich history of artists' books. With art book fairs only just beginning to be held again in mid-2021, the one-and-a-half year pause has offered scope for reflection on the fairs' role as a forum for critique of the medium, the industry, and for learning from one another—and hopefully selling a few books.

Last year, when the world came to a standstill, I was sixteen-thousand kilometers away from my home in Berlin, at the Melbourne Art Book Fair. Rumours had been flying since December; those of us who had come from Europe for the fair knew something was afoot, but we couldn't have expected it to hit so suddenly. The first day of the fair we all were touched by what seemed like the over-precaution of hand sanitiser by the litre sitting on each table. On day two, established exhibitors were regaling the younger exhibitors with horror stories from the early days of the AIDS pandemic; and we asked ourselves, "could this turn out to be something similar?" By the third day, exhibitors were quietly withdrawing en masse, public attendance was almost non-existent, three exhibitors had to check themselves into the hospital with Covid symptoms as opposed to joining me in a panel discussion called *Publishing After the Internet*. All while the exceptional organiser was nobly trying to save her sinking ship, fearing she would be going down with it. Anxious googling at my table made it abundantly clear that I wouldn't be making it back to Europe, but rather, I would be going to Auckland to stay with my family for, as it turned out, almost six months.

Sixteen months on, those early days of Covid-19 seem like a fever dream of rumour, speculation, hysteria and uncertainty. Now, back in Europe, with its new and ever changing host of regulations, art book fairs are slowly starting up again. Artists and independent art publishers, many of us worn by attempts to force our practice and communities into the online realm, are breathing a sigh of relief. But what can we learn from the dramatic shift in medium we were all coaxed into exploring? Should we simply continue using existing methods? Or have we learnt new ways of disseminating our work that we should explore further, while also allowing for a more democratic inclusion of visible artists?

Art publishing, or the publication of artists' books, differs from the catalogues, monographs and other publications you might find in museum and gallery bookshops. The term 'artists' books' refers to publications that have been conceived as artworks in their own right, with and often by the artist. This includes but is not limited to: sculptures in book form, works on paper, printmaking, photo books, zines and even highly designed, industrially printed books. An example of particularly high acclaim, and true to the American

avant-garde of the 1960s, is *Royal Road Test* (1967) by Ed Ruscha, Patrick Blackwell and Mason Williams. As a 'test', the artists threw a Royal typewriter from a speeding buick on a highway in the Nevada desert. The artists then presented the aftermath as a supposedly objective photographic documentation in the style of a forensic report. The artists credited themselves not as authors but as 'driver', 'thrower' and 'photographer', while the deconstruction investigation itself became the very subject matter of the book.[01]



Experiencing *Replika Volume II: Ellipse*, Replika Publishing, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.



Final production stage of *Replika Volume II: Ellipse*, Replika Publishing, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.



Replika Volume II: Ellipse, Replika Publishing, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.



Replika Volume II: Ellipse, Replika Publishing, 2017. Image: Replika Publishing.

Some of us may think of books as having a fixed and concrete form, but in fact, the book form has been in constant flux and dispute from the first moment ink was put to paper. To this day, no one is able to certifiably agree on what constitutes a book and what doesn't.[02] It is a medium begging to have its boundaries pushed beyond its own binding. The artists' book then, considered as an

object, and as an art-object, challenges established ideas of what it means to ‘read’ and in many cases proposes a new kind of reading process. In opposition to an exhibition, which is experienced publicly and collectively, the book is an intimate, personal artform that can be encountered privately. Yet, similar to a curated exhibition, there is a predetermined sequence—the book dictates how the viewer moves through the work and requires the participation of the audience: the act of turning the page.

In most cases, the purchase of artists’ books directly profits the artist. Their price point also allows for a broad range of collectors, who with even little to no means are able to establish a private art collection. In one of the earliest instances of artists producing their own books, William Blake[03] sought this practice as "a means of bringing the production of illustrated texts under his own control so that he could become his own publisher, independent of commercial publishers and letterpress printers."[04] This independence is fundamental to the creation of artists’ books, and allows artists to operate outside the traditional capitalist structure of art markets.

In 2015, while participating in a photography masterclass in New York City, in which we spent the afternoons visiting all of Manhattan's most prestigious white cube galleries, overwhelmed, I escaped to attend the New York Art Book Fair at MoMA PS1. Those six hours I spent in Queens changed everything. As a teenager I had read every single book in my high school and local public libraries on the topic of art. Of all the books I read, I was most enamoured by the do-it-yourself-ness of the Fluxus movement; the Dadaists’ use of ephemera and Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau* (c. 1923—1937); and the introspectiveness, domesticity, marginal and intensively private nature of Louise Bourgeois' work. But those worlds had felt like far-away dreams (as most things do when you grow up in New Zealand and are erroneously led to believe that it’s not *valuable* culture unless it’s European culture) of a reality that no longer existed. Until, ten years later at that art book fair, I suddenly realised, this was it: independent art publishing. In this world there was an abundance of different visual cultures, each with their own value. The artists didn’t have to wait for some authoritative stale collector or institution to assign value—if the

artist felt the work was necessary, then they would make it—even if that meant making just two Xerox copies at their local bodega.

Immediately after returning to Berlin that year, I called my friend, neighbour and fellow photographic artist, Youvalle Levy. After looking at the selection of publications I had brought back and joking together that we could do that too, we founded Replika Publishing, an independent publishing house working directly with artists. Replika has come a long way since that night in my small Berliner Kitchen six years ago. We have been able to establish the collective to the point that many artists now approach us to publish together, collaborate, or simply to ask for advice and two of our titles are in the MoMA artists' book collection.



Youvalle Levy and Freya Copeland of Replika Publishing outside their studio in Neukölln, Berlin, September, 2021. Image: Merve Terzi.



Youvalle Levy and Freya Copeland of Replika Publishing with some of their latest titles in their studio in Neukölln, Berlin, September, 2021. Image: Merve Terzi.



Youvalle Levy and Freya Copeland of Replika Publishing with some of their latest titles in their studio in Neukölln, Berlin, September, 2021. Image: Merve Terzi.



Replika Publishing at Stockholm Art Book Fair, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Image: Eliska Kovacikova.



Members of the public viewing Replika titles, Stockholm Art Book Fair, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Image: Youvalle Levy.



Freya Copeland representing Replika Publishing at Artslibris, Barcelona, 2021. Image: tandem projects.



Replika Publishing at Stockholm Art Book Fair, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Image: Eliska Kovacikova.

Working, or trying to break through, as an artist today often means spending large portions of time writing exhibition, grant, funding or competition proposals, trying to mould your work to fit a certain gallery, institution or collection, compromising concept

and materiality and/or softening your message all in the hopes that you might receive some acknowledgement that would then allow you to produce more work. Independent art publishing serves as a quasi-get-out-of-jail-free route around many of the issues in the art world at large. Artist books don't have to require a large investment, the approval of a curator, client, collector or institution. We are not bound by needing to have mass appeal, or even little appeal: if just one person connects with one of our titles, we have succeeded.

For Replika, art book fairs are our lifeblood. We have exhibited in roughly fifteen art book fairs from Amsterdam to New York to Tokyo. It's there that we are able to leave our insular studio practice and participate in conversations about not just the form of the book, but all of the multitudes of issues artists are able to raise in their publishing practices. However, that is not to say that the artists' book community is without its own pitfalls. Some art book and photo book fairs have grown to the point of being their own gatekeeping entities. Each time we, Replika Publishing, attend an art book fair, we are struck by how evident certain issues are. Despite the best efforts of most fair organisers, there is never enough representation of BIPOC artists; never enough gender diversity and queer representation. Many book fairs price participation to the point of exclusion for smaller independent or individual artists, or artists coming from afar or without state support; and artist book stores and certain distributors who fail to pay their invoices after picking up books at fairs.

Since the 1970s, Western European and North American artists' books have received a considerable amount of interest from the very institutions they initially sought to circumnavigate, but they are by no means the only regions producing such work. What about books coming from outside those regions? Why aren't they seen to have just as much communicative and artistic power? If independent art publishing can function as a means to bypass gatekeepers, why do the European and American fairs still present so little of the publishing practices from East Asia, West Africa and Oceania?



Kalt by Freya Copeland and Youvalle Levy, Replika Publishing, 2019. Image: Replika Publishing.



Kalt by Freya Copeland and Youvalle Levy, Replika Publishing, 2019. Image: Replika Publishing.



Footfalls Echo by Freya Copeland, Replika Publishing, 2019. Image: Replika Publishing.



Footfalls Echo by Freya Copeland, Replika Publishing, 2019. Image: Replika Publishing.



Footfalls Echo by Freya Copeland, Replika Publishing, 2019. Image: Replika Publishing.

New Zealand too, has a smaller, but often vibrant, artists' book output—a testament to our prevailing do-it-yourself ethos. As a first year student at The University of Auckland's Fine Arts school, visiting the old Elam Library I was fortunate enough to experience some of that work firsthand, to turn those pages, activate that work. But it was also at that time that I noticed the institution favouring inherently eurocentric, masculine, work. Years later, through various discussions with my peers, I realised that this unspoken value placement has encouraged those of us whose work fits that mould to self promote with confidence, while those of us working with more niche subject matter or processes, have had less confidence sharing our work. Self- or independent publishing has granted me the confidence I was lacking to realise that although my work is insular, quiet, domestic, subjective, soft, secret; it also deserves to be presented to a public, and I am learning to accept myself as an artist as opposed to feeling like I'm making the 'wrong' work.

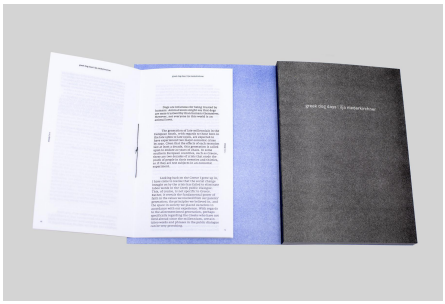
My artistic and curatorial practice is primarily centered around archival systems, primary source documents, evidential

photography and mythologies. I explore the boundaries between institutional systems and personal and collective narratives; ephemera from my family and elsewhere is often my starting point. For me, the most important part of my practice has always been the research; the digging through old albums, books and archives; the uncovering of truths, secrets, lies and tales. My work is usually an amalgamation of the mess I seem to make while digging. For this reason, I have never felt that my work should be open, on display, on a gallery wall. I want my audience to be able to approximate at least some of the sense of excitement I have in making the work, so the book seemed to be the perfect form. And it allows me to have complete control over the editing, production and distribution of my work.

The Auckland Zine Fest has been promoting a diverse community of art book makers in Auckland since 2009, The Karangahape Road art book shop and artist studio Strange Goods has become a haven for a wide variety of artists' books and publications in recent years, the Angela Morton Room at the Takapuna Library hosts a vast collection of artists' publications spanning the history of New Zealands' artists' books and the Samoa House Library has taken on a large swath of publications that were unfortunately removed from the University of Auckland's collection when the Elam Library was closed down recently.[06] While happily exploring all of these resources last year during my Covid-induced stay, I couldn't help but wonder why New Zealand art book publishing garners little attention or exposure abroad.



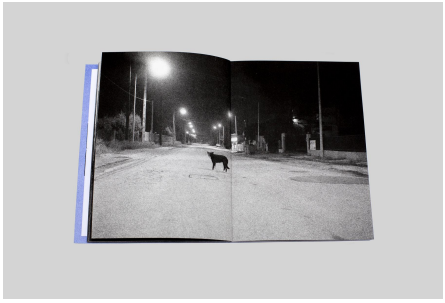
Greek Dog Days by Ilja Niederkirchner, 2020. Image: Replika Publishing.



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Weathering by Freya Copeland and Youvalle Levy, Replika Publishing, 2021. Image: Replika Publishing.



Weathering by Freya Copeland and Youvalle Levy, Replika Publishing, 2021. Image: Replika Publishing.

Covid-19 and the resulting cancellation of art book fairs internationally over the last year and a half has seen a multitude of attempts to move the distribution and dissemination of artists' books online. Some larger fairs (Tokyo Art Book Fair, New York Art Book Fair) were seemingly successful, while other smaller fairs who see less value in exhibiting the publications of established institutions, industrial publishers and university presses; instead favouring individual artists, collectives and small and independent publishers are testing out new fair models. For example, Recreo Art Book Fair in Valencia, Spain offered publishers the ability to exhibit and sell their work at communally managed tables, thereby removing both extreme table fees and travel costs and allowing more members of the public to attend despite strict capacity enforcement. If measures such as these are carried out beyond the pandemic, perhaps we can hope to see more work from publishers and artists who in the past have been less able to physically attend.

2020 has also seen a rise in community-building online lectures, resource sharing, seminars and workshops— discussions that had formerly happened at book fairs are now borderless and open to larger audiences and more diverse contributors. Online resources such as Edcat have grown in popularity and now serve as both an

invaluable archive and facilitator; connecting artists' book lovers with artists' book sellers and, better yet, directly to the artists or publishers.

In a recent discussion with fellow exhibitors at the Artslibris Fair in Barcelona, in June 2021, we reflected on what we had missed during the worst of Covid lockdowns and what we didn't miss at all. We wondered if we could continue to push these new online resources and use them as a catalyst to be able to further the publishing practices of more marginalised artists? Could this be a way to prevent book fairs from morphing into the exact type of large arts institution we had all been trying to avoid in the first place? Perhaps this year-and-a-half-freeze afforded by Covid-19 was just the right moment to pause and reevaluate why we publish, why we want to share this work, and the direction that art fairs are taking. We navigated new ways to move our communities online to great effect, but once the fairs return in full force, these steps should not be neglected. The discourse around the needs of our community should continue so that we can remain true to our DIY ethos and can continue to support each other and even more practitioners from an ever broader range of communities.

Footnotes

01. Ruscha, Ed, Williams, Mason, Blackwell, Patrick, *Royal Road Test,* (Los Angeles, California, E.Ruscha, 1967). As viewed in the MoMA online collection https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146932, accessed on August 9th, 2021.

02. The first known book is still in dispute as scholars fail to agree on what criteria is necessary in order to determine the definition of a book. Some state it must contain a "world view", others attest it must consist of bound paper pages, while a few claim even stacked clay tablets can constitute a book. John P. Feather "The Book in History and the History of the Book." *The Journal of Library History* (1986), 21(1): pp. 12-26. Accessed September 2, 2021. www.jstor.org/stable/25541677.

03. English poet, painter, and engraver William Blake epitomised the DIY ethos. In the years 1783-1820, Blake self-published some of his best known works, including *Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experienc*e, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. He wrote the text, designed accompanying illustrations, and etched these onto copper plates, printed and colored the pages to create his illuminated manuscripts. In producing entire publications on his own, he was able to blur genre and media lines which was otherwise unheard of. See: The William Blake Archive.

04. Jane Turner, ed., *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 4 (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1996), p. 117.

05. Stefan Kilma, Artists Books, *A Critical Survey of The Literature*, (New York: Granary Books, 1998), p. 7; Jacki Apple, *Artists' Books, New Zealand Tour*, (New York: Franklin Furnace Archive,

N.Y.C, 1978), National Art Gallery, Wellington, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, Auckland City Art Gallery.

06. Rachel Ashby and Vanessa Crofskey, “A Library is More Than Books: On the Proposed Closure of the Elam Fine Arts Library”, *The Pantograph Punch* (30 April 2018), www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/more-than-books, accessed 3 August 2021

Biographies



Freya Copeland is a New Zealand artist based in Berlin. Copeland works in the gap between the visual language of institutional systems and personal narratives and myths. She often employs transitory printed matter and ephemera and seeks to single out the inherent limitations of the photographic medium. Copeland is a founding director of Replika Publishing, which publishes small-run photo books and artist editions. She is also a founding director of Independent Photo Fair Berlin. Copeland studied at Elam at the University of Auckland and Berliner Technischer Kunsthochschule. She has received the Artproof Germany Grant, The Volumes Zurich Award and the ArtsLibris-Fundació Banc Sabadell Award. She has exhibited her photographs and books in New Zealand, Australia, Japan, The United States of America and throughout Europe.

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