

Book

Simon Cutts: The Small Press Model

For the best part of 60 years, Simon Cutts – artist-poet-publisher – has created spaces within art that operate critically and which, taking a range of forms, are publications that he defines as primary. Whether he likes it or not, Cutts has been active at both the centre and periphery of debates about artists' publishing, and *The Small Press Model* takes stock, dropping polemic and metaphor in equal measure. This anthology gathers together texts both old and newly minted, and is a companion to his earlier *Some Forms of Availability* (2007, RGAP) as that book's subtitle makes clear: *Critical Passages on the Book and Publication*. It also sits well alongside the focus of Michael Hampton's book, *Unshelved, Reconceiving the artists' book* (2015, Uniformbooks; Reviews AM398), because though the centre of Cutts's attention is not on the artists' book as a category or way of working, over the past 60 years he has in many ways shaped the identity of the artists' book by consistently resisting and challenging that category from the beginning, not least via his collaborations with poet Stuart Mills through the Trent Bookshop and Tarasque Press in the mid 1960s.

The category of artists' books seems flawed from the off. We don't talk of artists' paintings or artists' sculpture or artists' watercolours because that is what 'artists' do. Artists' books or the artists' film exist as categories, I suppose, to distinguish them from other books or films. Such an idea seems to have little place in an era in which medium specificity has become of less consequence. Yet a conceptual rationale and mindset that spawned a renaissance for book production by artists through the 1960s and 1970s has formed an orthodoxy and academicisation around what artists' books might actually be, and correspondingly created the jumping-off point for Hampton and his reconsideration of the genre through the recognition that the 'rarefied world of artists' books has been blinded by its own limited protocols'.

Cutts, like Hampton, takes a wider view. When he publishes his own work or other people's it is from the standpoint of what he has termed the 'primary' book, produced in what the historian Stephen Bann has termed the 'critical mode'. From one point of view this might be where the tradition of radical pamphleteering and the political manifesto meets satire and polemic, but it is really about a recognition of the publication's purpose and a recognition of particular forms fitting that purpose – from postcard to leaflet to pamphlet to book. The space of the book inhabits all of this as well as distribution and reception, which also makes the spaces of the book into a building, a bookspace – a place to find books, to read, to talk, to see exhibitions.

Just as Cutts is part of a tradition of modernist publishing that encompasses the collective and collaborative little magazine enterprises of the 1920s as much as the trans- and multimedia and multi-disciplinarity that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, his publishing through Coracle Press (1975–87) and the establishment

of galleries and bookspaces in London such as Coracle on Camberwell New Road SE5 (1975–87) or Workfortheyetodo on Narrow Street E14 (1993–95) or Hanbury Street E1 (1995–98) has played to a productive ambiguity and breadth of function, where the physical space is itself defined by a mode of production, distribution and reception that defines publishing.

The interwoven words 'critical', 'metaphor' and 'primary' are threaded through this book, as Cutts succinctly summed up in his earlier anthology *Some Forms of Availability*: his concern was for 'the book occupying and equivalencing real space ... the book should be a prime object, occupying if not sculptural, certainly critical space'. As metaphor, critical primary books can be published as an alternative to physical and financial gallery frameworks. In this, Cutts echoes principles that were also behind Printed Matter when it was founded in 1976; he also identifies affinities with other hybrid bookspace/artist publishers such as Brian Lane's Gallery Number Ten in Blackheath between 1966 and 1970; Ulises Carrion's Other Books and So in Amsterdam between 1975 and 1979; and Jan Voss, Henriëtte van Egten and Rúna Thorkelsdóttir's Boekie Woekie, also in Amsterdam since 1986. One view might be that a gallery can be understood as a publication, or its programme as a sequence of publications within the model of book production, which is how Cutts conceived his use of the gigantic and disused Renshaw Hall in Liverpool as Allotment, a venue that as Allotment 1 framed an equally colossal sculpture, *Stone Field* by Richard Long, in 1987, before it closed, despite plans for much else to come. The bookspaces he has made over the years, despite their obvious differences to Allotment, operate according to a similar model and certainly not as a defined gallery or bookshop.

The Small Press Model reflects and offers accounts of such movement between metaphor and real space drawing on Cutts's own achievements with Coracle as well as fruitful intersections with other artists/publishers that reinforce the degree to which the terrain that Cutts moves over is collective and collaborative. Yet the kernel of his poetic, critical, primary books is his reliance on affective metaphor, underlined in the book's first section by the text on 'The Metaphor Books' which offers commentary to a selection of his productions that illuminate the different ways in which he deploys metaphor. This is then taken up as a refrain by the sequence of texts grouped as 'Equivalent Spaces' and then brought to earth by the final section, 'Particular Dislocations', which is kicked off by a reflection on 'Brancusi's Sewing Box' and the lack of significance of ownership in the face of an understanding of what that sewing box tells us of Constantin Brancusi's success in fusing his sculpture within his approach to living: 'All Sculpture is Furniture.'

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Andrew Wilson is an art historian, critic and curator, and a trustee of the Art Monthly Foundation. He is editor of the Patrick Heron catalogue raisonné project.

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