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The Year in Independent Art Publishing: A Roundtable  
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Catherine Damman on "Steve Paxton: Selected Works" at Dia:Beacon  
Claudia La Rocco on "Fred Herko: A Crash Course"  
Claudia La Rocco on Wendy Whelan's farewell performance for New York City Ballet

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Hillary Chute on Julie Doucet's *My New York Diary*  
Keith Mayerson on his *My American Dream* (1991–)  
Christopher Glazek on Generation *DIS*

## The Year in Independent Art Publishing: A Roundtable

12.23.14



The 2014 New York Art Book Fair. (Photo: @visaforviolet)

*Was 2014 a banner year for small-scale art presses? Printing technology is increasingly accessible, publications seem to accompany every exhibition, and the principal experience of Printed Matter's New York and Los Angeles Art Book Fairs was congestion. In early December, artforum.com managing editor Lauren O'Neill-Butler sat down with artists Paul Chan, Ian Cheng, and Micaela Durand of Badlands Unlimited; curator Howie Chen of Dispatch; and Primary Information copublisher Miriam Katzeff to discuss just what it is that makes art publishing today so different, so appealing.*

**artforum.com:** Against the drone of complaints about the decline of criticism and publishing more broadly, it's heartening that—at least from the outside—independent art publications appear to be flourishing. What's been your experience? Is there evidence for this?

**Badlands Unlimited:** Yes, in terms of how many emails we received from people asking us about independent publishing. We're being grilled more about what we're doing.

**Primary Information:** In the past year, more organizations—or budding organizations—have approached us because they want to publish their own books.

**Dispatch:** Are the inquiries mostly about viable and sustainable models for publishing?

**Badlands Unlimited:** It was a lot of people asking if we're making money. They were curious as to whether e-books, for instance, are profitable, and if our model is sustainable.

**Primary Information:** And is it?

**Badlands Unlimited:** It's sustainable enough that after almost five years we're still here. But whether we can keep it going depends on how adaptable we are to the changing nature of reading while staying true to the particular vision we have about what is worth publishing. We learned on a recent panel discussion that our e-books get pirated a lot in China—they are printed out. This is a positive sign for us. There is no greater vote of confidence in our publishing than piracy.

**Dispatch:** So it all becomes material at some point.

**Badlands Unlimited:** Miriam, do you foresee Primary Information doing e-books? I know you do pdf releases.

**Primary Information:** Yes, we're going to do more pdf releases, and the pdfs on our website are always

links



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**Dispatch:** This year Primary Information published IRL, a pdf publication produced by my research collaborative, JEQU. Since it did not have to conform to "e-book" specifications, we were really able to play with the design possibilities and experience of the pdf—instead of a standard book page we used the width of a smartphone and the maximum allowable length of a pdf at the time. The overall publication was three long pages—a text, moodbook, and interview with sociologist Luc Boltanski—each being 200 inch-long scrolls. When you download it, it assembles the images randomly each time, so each publication is unique and has its own moodbook.

**artforum.com:** Let's return to the money aspect.

**Primary Information:** You mean the lack of money aspect?

**artforum.com:** Right. So the pdfs that you all offer are free?

**Badlands Unlimited:** They run the gamut. We've released free pdfs, free e-books, e-books that are \$0.99. And we sell paper books and handmade limited editions.

**artforum.com:** How do you decide on a format? What should be a pdf, what should be a book? And why is it that pdfs, which are hardly immaterial, continue to be undervalued?

**Badlands Unlimited:** We feel our way into a way, so to speak. For instance, we gave out excerpts of *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* by Calvin Tomkins as free pdfs. For a few months we called grad art-history departments around the country and asked if they wanted the excerpt to see if they would be interested enough to pick it up as part of their curriculum. And that seemed to work. So we have degrees of "free." As a commercial publisher that's what we're trying to figure out: What degree of free would work within the model that we're trying to create?

**artforum.com:** What are Badlands's sources for revenue?

**Badlands Unlimited:** Paper books, e-books, limited editions, consulting, prescription drugs, astrology (on the weekends only).

**artforum.com:** But does, for instance, winning the Hugo Boss Prize influence the way Badlands operates?

**Badlands Unlimited:** Absolutely. Now we can pay our lawyers.

**artforum.com:** Do you see Badlands as a something that has to produce a profit to survive?

**Badlands Unlimited:** What's interesting about capitalism in the twenty-first century is that a business does not have to profit to survive. Look at Amazon. In these great times, profitability is too minor of an ambition, don't you think?

**Dispatch:** Have your e-books made it to free sites like BookZZ? What do you think about these share sites? I wonder if there is enough demand for people wanting to trade it or do things circulate in more specific channels?

**Badlands Unlimited:** We've seen some searches come up where you can torrent the Duchamp book. Someone scanned the whole book. That's the most pirated book of ours.

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Badlands Unlimited advertisement for Calvin Tomkins's *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* (2013).

**Dispatch:** Do you get a lot of questions about the ethics of e-commerce publishing?

**Badlands Unlimited:** We like the questions about e-commerce because they lead to questions about why we're publishing and what we publish, and what we publish is inextricably connected to how we survive. Our model is in essence a goof off what Barnett Newman once said—someone asked him why he paints, and he said he wanted something to look at. We publish books because we want something to read.

But we also have a particular understanding of the *kind* of books that we want to read and publish. We call it the Montaigne principle of publishing: Montaigne wrote essays because he was trying to figure out how to live. And for one reason or another, the book as an evolving historical form seems most suited to put one in the mood to understand just that: how to live. Sometimes for the better, maybe for the worse. Whatever the case, our wager is that for a book to matter it has to exude this peculiar “aura” as part of its formal properties, whatever format the book takes on. That’s certainly why we published *The Afternoon Interviews*. And it colors everything else we do. Even the erotic romances that we’re putting out in the spring.

**artforum.com:** I’d like to hear Primary Information and Dispatch talk a little bit about their publishing philosophy.

**Primary Information:** When we are working with historical material, we’re considering whether the material is easily available already and if there is a need for it. With contemporary projects, we’re often introducing artists or a different part of their practice to a larger audience. As a nonprofit, we’re not just showcasing the taste of two people. So there might be a book we do that isn’t something that I personally want to read more than anything else, but I think that it needs to be out there. Still, I think that most of the books and the projects that we put out are ones I want to read.

**Dispatch:** Curating can be a type of publishing. Both involve the activity of producing and relaying information through various channels and materials—this is how I approach Dispatch and my other projects.

As a reader I’m interested in the productions of Badlands, PI, and other art publishers, and much of my consumption has to do with gleaning people’s productions, of knowing the vectors of what type of publishing is happening now so that I can get a picture of what’s interesting and what people think is interesting to readers. With the amount of things published these days, it might not always be about deep reading, but you get a valuable sense of the territory. Maybe things are getting closer to the type of “reading” that occurs when we scroll through Instagram feeds, for better or for worse.

**artforum.com:** That leads to a question I had about consumption at the New York Art Book Fair. Could you speak about your experiences presenting there, specifically this year, which also broke attendance records for any event in MoMA PS1’s forty-three-year history?

**Primary Information:** Because we’re committed to pricing our books so affordably, we can’t afford to do many book fairs and make our costs back. NYABF is a great opportunity for us, but it can also be inhumanely crowded. What brings all these people to the book fair? So many of them are interested in art or books and then some of them really enjoy touching the books . . . or appreciating art through osmosis? I’m not sure. But the fair is where I get to meet the largest number of our readers. We launched a new book, *ALBUM*, at the fair this year, and it went very well in part because so many people were able to see it in person. Also, having Square for payments has made it so people who are going to buy books buy even more, instead of looking for an ATM. Perhaps it even makes people forget how much money they’re spending.



Left: Cover of Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveen's *ALBUM* (Primary Information, 2014). Right: New Lovers Erotica forthcoming from Badlands Unlimited in Spring 2015.

**Dispatch:** We’ve done it for many years now and have always enjoyed it 100 percent. We try to take publishing at its widest or most abstract definition. It’s cool that the fair’s organizers consider editions and other formats as “publishing.” This year, we presented printed works by Thank You Brenda and JEQU and we shared the table with Halmos. Over the years, I’ve noticed that independent publishing has become part of a creative lifestyle that people want to be part of—so they’ll go just to be there, but books might not be the main thing that they’re actually interested in. That’s why oftentimes people come away with a T-shirt, button, or some other swag, which is okay too.

Speaking of forms of payment, our proposal for this year’s book fair was that instead of having a table, we would have three modified ATM machines. The publishing part would’ve been printing the receipt. But no ATM company wanted to participate because it’s not profitable anymore despite tens of thousands of people attending the fair. I think it would’ve been a good idea four years ago before Square but maybe not this year.

**Primary Information:** True, but four years ago, there would’ve been less people there.

**Dispatch:** It’s the total experience package now. The fair is the Coachella of publishing, complete with microclimates and body odors. Given the scale, it ran amazingly smooth this year from a presenter perspective.

**Badlands Unlimited:** I took a Vine when I was at the fair and was like, “Coachella!”

**Primary Information:** Did you crowd surf?

**Dispatch:** You can pretty much festivalize anything in the art world at this point.

**Primary Information:** The fair also gives people the idea that they should publish whatever they're making or their friends are making, and I feel OK about that.

**Badlands Unlimited:** What a thumbs-up for independent publishing!

**Primary Information:** I'm not talking about people who are trying to start a company or an organization, but more those that are publishing books as something they can just step in and out of. But I think the fair shows us how it can be appealing to control all of the aspects of a book and self-publish in any edition size and become part of this community rather than approaching a larger publisher.

**Badlands Unlimited:** We've tried to think of ways to use the book fair that don't just involve selling our books. This year Hans Ulrich Obrist and Claudia La Rocco did signings, which gave them a chance to chat with their readers. It's vital that readers and authors meet. And because most of our authors are artists, we also showed some of their works at our booth—for instance last year we showed works by Josh Kline, Gil Gentile, and others. The book fair becomes a way for Badlands to act as a publisher and a small gallery. What's great about it too is how diverse it is. You can go to a vitrine and see a \$80,000 storyboard of *La Jetée* by Chris Marker and walk two rooms away and see what Dispatch has and two floors up and see what's at Primary Information or go to the zine area and buy a \$1 zine. That diversity is still its most vital aspect.

**Primary Information:** Well, there's that joke that a kind of clueless person walks up to a gallery booth at an art fair and asks, "Are you the artist?" And the dealer just scoffs at them. But at the book fair, now that I think about it, you do stand a really good chance of meeting the artist who made that book standing right behind the table.

*Paul Chan founded Badlands Unlimited in 2010 and was later joined by artists Ian Cheng, Micaela Durand, and Matthew So.*

*Dispatch is a New York-based curatorial partnership between Howie Chen and Gabrielle Giattino established in 2007 as a production office and project space and later transitioned to a peripatetic exhibition model.*

*Miriam Katzeff formed Primary Information with James Hoff in 2006 to foster intergenerational dialogue through the publication of artists' books, writing, documents, and editions from the 1960s to the present.*

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