



INDEPENDENT TOGETHER

Last year's crisis pushed independent art book publishers to shift business models and recommit to community-oriented ideals.

By Dushko Petrovich Córdoba

“A SILVER PADLOCK IS NOT A GUN,” A PERSON says plainly. Then another declares, just as plainly: “A set of keys is not a gun.” Then a third: “A beer bottle is not a gun.” And a fourth: “Tin foil is not a gun.” They’re speaking in a YouTube video linked to the Programs page of the website of the April 2020 Los Angeles Art Book Fair (LAABF). The video continues in this manner, with participants detailing how forty mundane objects are not, in fact, guns – even though police officers in cities across the U.S. somehow thought they were, and fatally shot the unarmed people, mostly young Black men, who held them.

The Printed Matter Virtual Art Book Fair exhibition page for **Hambre Hambre Hambre**, a [lesbian feminist publishing initiative based in Santiago, Chile](#).

The video is an iteration of a project by Cara Levine about racial profiling and police brutality that has taken the form of workshops, sculptures, and publications, including a book titled *This Is Not a Gun* released last year by Candor Arts and Sming Sming Books. Levine has been making ceramic versions of the not-gun objects, and had planned to hold a ceramics workshop at LAABF to celebrate the book’s launch. But when in-person gatherings were called off, she had to improvise. Levine asked contributors to the book to film themselves in bedrooms, living rooms, and backyards reading texts they had prepared. The

Courtesy Printed Matter, New York

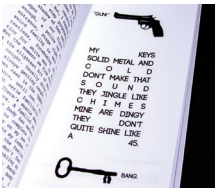
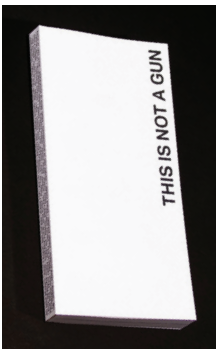
material is undeniably heavy, and the presentation adds its own somber weight. Instead of a live reading, we experience that rare thing: video intimacy. Looking intently into their phones, the writers seem to be speaking directly to us. Protected by their domestic quarters, the performers are also exposed in their isolation, and through that vulnerability, they are able to touch us in ours. In April 2020, when we were just learning how to share our separateness, Levine brought people together to contemplate the racist illogic of police violence. Two months later, the country exploded in protest.

Levine's video is archived on the fair's website along with other virtual programming. It would be easy to read that record as a sad relic. And it is sad to be reminded of dashed plans from a moment when the terrifying scale of the pandemic was just coming into view. But as the video for *This Is Not a Gun* attests, that moment held premonitions of how artists and independent art book publishers would adapt to the pandemic – how its pressures prompted them to build new kinds of relationships. The project is emblematic of a resourceful and committed community finding ways to survive, reorganize, and even expand during a moment of profound crisis.

IF “ART PUBLISHING” CONJURES IMAGES OF expensive coffee-table tomes and sumptuously illustrated exhibition catalogues, it means something entirely different when preceded by “independent”: a vast array of publications, related only tangentially – or even antagonistically – to the world of galleries and museums. Produced mainly by small and midsize

outfits using inexpensive printing methods and experimental design techniques, these small-run publications tend away from the full-color glossy look of monographs and catalogues. This elaboration of the DIY traditions of zines, poetry chapbooks, and activist publications has been encouraged by the rise of desktop publishing, the internet's validation of subcultures, and a growing disdain for the art world's starkly unequal economy. Perhaps most important, all these disparate kinds of publishers have been regularly gathered together, often under a literal big tent, to share their works with the public and learn from one another.

The New York Art Book Fair, which started in 2006 with around fifty exhibitors, has become the world's biggest art book event, attracting 369 vendors and some 40,000 visitors to MoMA PS1 in 2019. The LA edition, added in 2013, had 390 vendors and more than 35,000 visitors in 2019. Spinoffs, numbering around 100, have proliferated both in smaller American cities and abroad. The independent publishing world has grown precisely because the fairs offer a strong sense of community, in contrast to chillier institutional and commercial spaces in the art world. The objects are relatively cheap, and the marketing is decidedly peer-to-peer. Exhibitors split tables, watch each other's merch, and buy each other's books. Some of these publishers are economically self-sustaining but most run their operations in conjunction with day jobs of various kinds, so there is a pervasive “labor of love” ethos that stands in stark contrast to the briskly businesslike atmosphere of art fairs proper. Most fair participants put out only a handful of books a year, buttressing



Above, cover and interior from Cara Levine's book *This Is Not a Gun*, 2020.

Left, a workshop from Levine's project *This Is Not a Gun*, organized during the For Freedoms Congress in Los Angeles, 2020.



Top: Courtesy Candor Arts and Smiling Press. Bottom: Courtesy For Freedoms/Photo Shay Myerson

Vendors at the 2019
LA Art Book Fair,
showing a mural by
Jeffrey Cheung of Unity
Press; at the Geffen
Contemporary at MOCA.

their income with tote bags, pins, and stickers.

Many of these enterprises depend on fair sales to meet their break-even budget goal. So the pandemic threatened total economic collapse, and community collapse with it. Those stakes were probably clearest to Sonel Breslav, director of fairs and exhibitions for Printed Matter. In a normal year, she would have produced the New York and LA fairs while attending a dozen others worldwide as an exhibitor. Covid brought a double shock: first, having to quickly shut down a massive in-person event, and second, having to reimagine it all to forestall economic and cultural ruin. After some listening sessions with vendors, Breslav's three-person team decided that in addition to maintaining commerce, the virtual fair would have

to prioritize spontaneity—to simulate the in-person experiences of “meeting people, learning about projects, being inspired.” But there was no clear way to do that. “I don’t think we knew what we were doing for a long time; we were building something new,” Breslav told me. “We were pretty scared.”

They started by building a “sortable directory” and asking exhibitors to connect websites they designed especially for the fair through that platform. “It was a mutual leap of faith,” Breslav said. “We were asking people to be brave.” The fair that emerged lacked the visceral camaraderie of tabling, to be sure, but it did seem to plug the financial hole. If sales didn’t match those of previous years, sellers’ expenses were also greatly reduced. They made other, possibly more sustainable connections via the fair’s digital portal.

Everyone sensed that gathering, at least virtually, would be important for morale, but nobody expected the events to be as popular as they were. Audiences gathered not because of geographic accessibility but because of shared interest. Attendance surged. Events that ordinarily squeezed thirty people into a room now had audiences numbering more than one hundred, according to Breslav, who monitored the online registrations. All over the world, new readers were revealing themselves. The community forged in sweaty confines at the previous fairs showed that it could survive at least a year in the ether of a virtual fair. Financially and emotionally, that came as a huge relief. More surprising, perhaps, the community continued to grow, connected in new ways, and helped each other more than ever. All this suggested that in the future both sales and events should be hybridized, both in-person and virtual—something Breslav said her exhibitors requested.

SURPRISING CHANGES WERE UNFOLDING

outside the fairs as well. Faced with dramatically lowered distributor requests early in the pandemic, Jeff Khonsary of New Documents and James Hoff of Primary Information found that their respective enterprises, both of which publish new art books and significant archival projects, were forced to emphasize direct-to-reader approaches both in communication and commerce, using newsletters and emails to drive sales from their own web stores and then mailing the books themselves. But what began as an act of desperation has resulted in more sustainable and satisfying business practices for them both. Refusing his distributors’ request for higher prices, Khonsary took a print-consulting job to cover the short-term losses and doubled down on his commitment to inexpensive art books, focusing his 2021 efforts on text-driven projects: two volumes devoted to Lucy Lippard’s fiction and a collection of Pope.L’s writing, *My Kingdom for a Title*. Primary Information, where Hoff is editorial director and leader of a four-person team, weathered the early part of the pandemic thanks to emergency government funding and a donation from Wolfgang Tillmans’s benefit program, 2020Solidarity, to which fifty-seven artists donated images for posters whose sales benefited struggling cultural institutions. After the worst moment passed, however, Primary Information’s direct sales



Courtesy Printed Matter/Photo Katie Neuhof

started going up, which more than offset the loss from distributors. Indeed, the annual subscriber option, where a flat rate gets you all the organization's books for a given year, underwent a fivefold increase: from eighty subscribers in 2019 to almost four hundred for 2021 so far. This steady inflow of funds has made the imprint sustainable.

Most people I talked to accounted for the increased readership and support with similar educated guesses. People stuck at home were reading more, certainly, and evading the internet doomscroll by doing so. They were therefore attracted to print for both tangibility and mental release. As readers realized that buying direct was the best way to support struggling publishers, a halo of mutual aid hovered over every purchase. This solidarity was often made more explicit as publishers, who had received support themselves, in turn offered books to fundraising drives or donated their profits directly to activist groups. In the 1970s, Lucy Lippard, one of Printed Matter's founders, predicted that cheap, portable artists' books would bring the avant-garde to the masses. She later recanted, having realized that Conceptual artists weren't interested in addressing the general public. But today's art publishers have moved beyond the dichotomy of high art and mass culture, recognizing that accessibility and impact don't require mass production – and may in fact be more attainable by publishers operating locally. During the pandemic, publishers who already saw activism and community work as part of their mission only sharpened their vision and reconfirmed their principles.

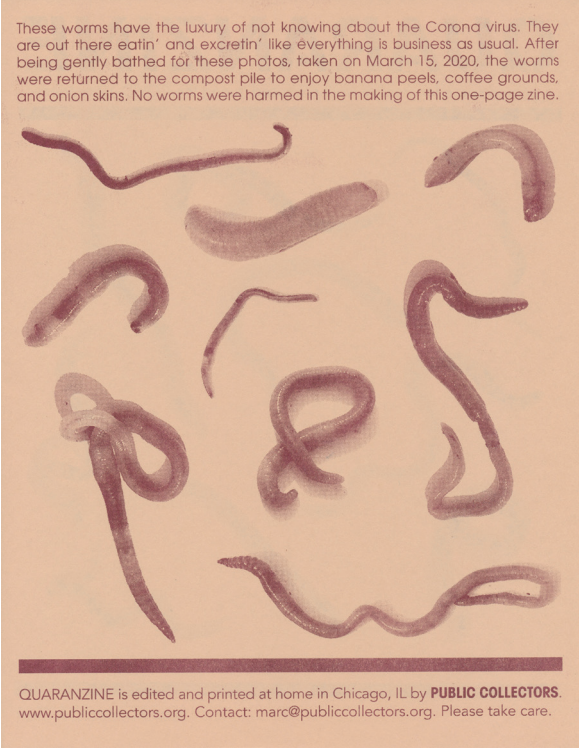
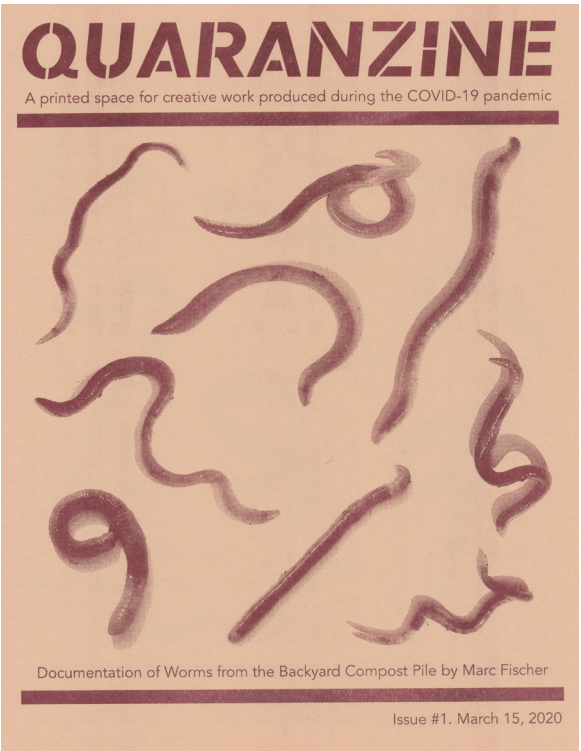
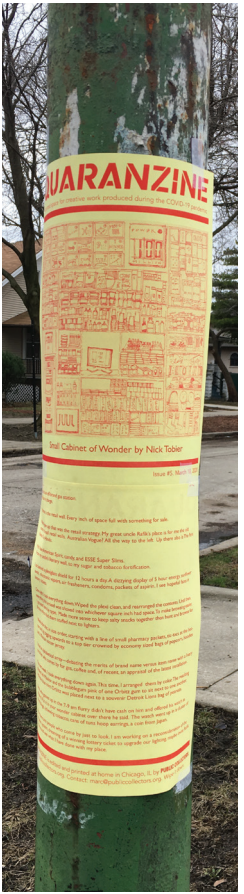
When Covid-19 hit, Erica Dawn Lyle was preparing a new issue of *Scam*, a periodical she has released intermittently over the course of twenty-five years, before joining the 2019 reunion tour of Bikini Kill as a guitarist. But when the 2020 tour was canceled, Lyle found herself changing publishing plans as well. Her new endeavor, *Kyanite*, out this summer, focuses explicitly on mutual aid. Describing her publishing practice as a way to “find the people who can help me think about the things I want to think about,” Lyle has used *Kyanite* to gather a group of poets, Indigenous-language preservationists, and activists to think about “ways that our fascist environment has eroded meaning” and the remediation work that can be done. Lyle has been thinking about mutual aid for years and was surprised, and somewhat disoriented, to see the term enter the mainstream so quickly during the pandemic. Still, as one of many publishers who sell their publications through sites such as Bailfront, which donates all proceeds to a bail fund, Lyle thinks cutting out the middleman and redirecting the distributor's cut to mutual aid initiatives hints at further ways resources could be better apportioned.

WORKING UNDER THE NAME PUBLIC COLLECTORS, Marc Fischer gathers and distributes, in pamphlet form, cultural artifacts like street flyers, CB radio QSL cards, and police scanner conversations that are ignored by major collecting institutions. The project involves extensive on-site research in libraries, swap meets, and other public spaces, and Fischer was spending his days at the criminal division of the

Courtesy Public Collectors

Right, the front and back of the first issue of **Public Collectors' Quaranzine**, published on Mar. 15, 2020.

Below, the front and back of Nick Tobier's issue of **Quaranzine**, published on Mar. 18, 2020.

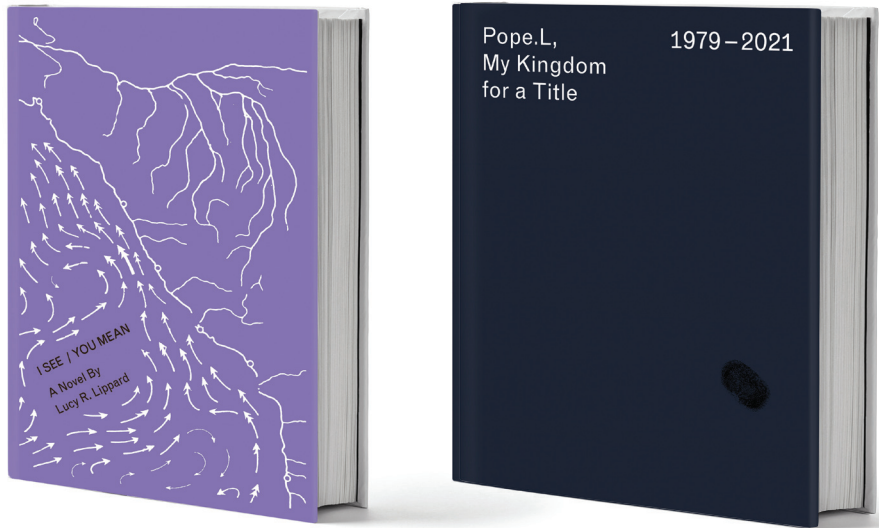


Circuit Court of Cook County in Chicago when the pandemic hit. Abandoning his role as host of the Courtroom Artist Residency – for which Fischer invited sixteen artists to observe in courtrooms with him, and then published their written and drawn observations in a series of reports – and locked out of other venues, Fischer had to improvise. Stuck at home and wanting urgently to respond to what was happening, he realized that many others felt the same way. Fischer

used his Risograph, ink, and leftover paper stock to set up operations in his basement studio, and started soliciting participants on social media. He called his new project *Quarantine*. The premise was simple: one day, one page, one collaborator.

Starting with a scan of some worms from his garden, which were “enjoying their ignorance of everything we were worrying about,” Fischer’s intense daily publication activities lasted from March 15 to June 22, 2020, producing one hundred issues in total. Fischer told me the publication “fulfilled an important mental health and social function” for himself and his collaborators. The intense one-on-one work yielded a more thoughtful record of what was happening than what could be found on social media. Likewise, the specificity and creativity of the publication meant that its stories exceeded the scope of those in mainstream publications. It provides a fascinating, varied record of the moment as poets, ecologists, children, art historians, activists, and artists all grapple in turn with the isolation, the mass death, and the police violence and resulting protests as they unfolded last year.

In addition to carefully taping the publications to surfaces around his neighborhood and posting all the issues online, Fischer sold twelve-issue assortment packs to individual buyers, and distributed complete sets to museums and libraries. My random dozen included “Coronavirus Comic Hacks” from June 9, a harrowing narrative collage by Badly Licked Bear. It



Above, recent covers for books published by New Documents.

Below, PMVABF exhibitor page of PrintRoom, a bookshop and presentation space in Rotterdam.

repurposes panels from *Give Me Liberty*, a dystopian 1990 comic book, to imagine an unhinged and yet scarily plausible vision of the US in 2020, with captions such as WHEN THE WHITE HOUSE BURNS, SIXTY-SEVEN SEPARATE FACTIONS CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONFLAGRATION. Brett Wallace’s poetic *Meditations*, published May 23, used bullet points



Courtesy Printed Matter

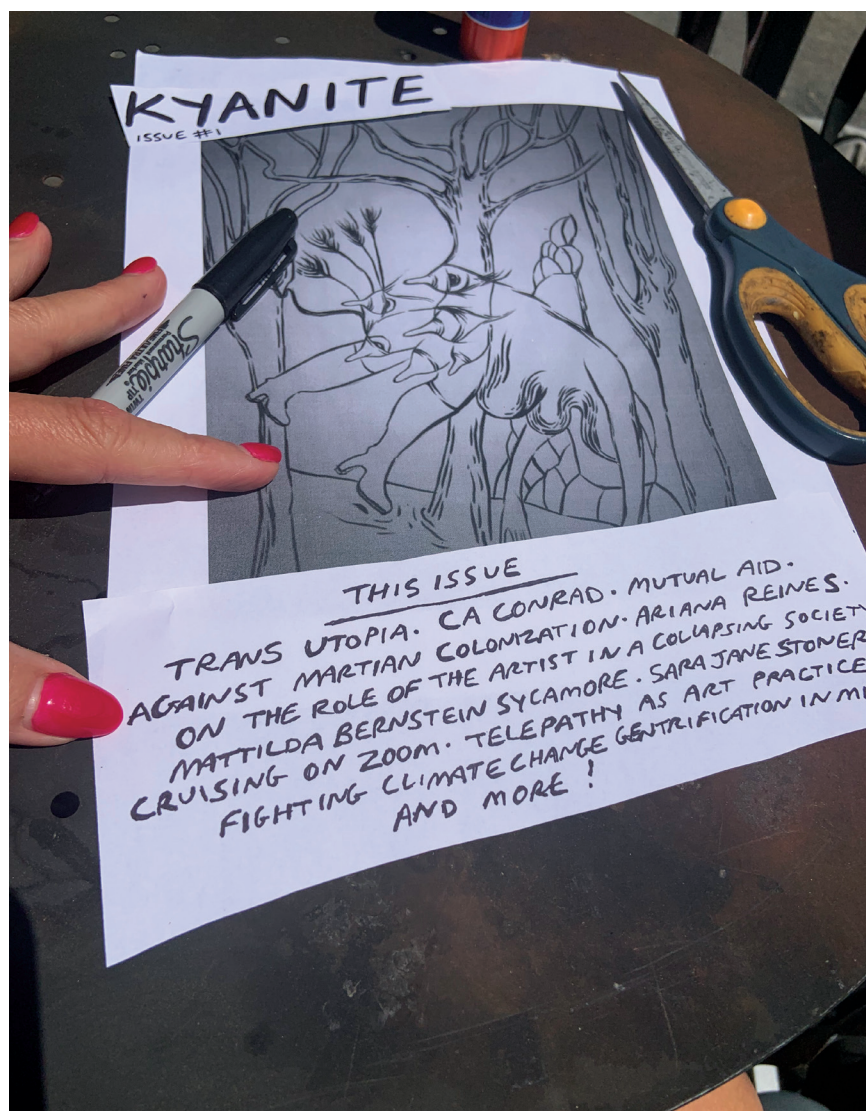
to list emotional states (“Feeling anxious” “Being hypervigilant”) and actions that could follow (“Talking is a start to organizing. Getting organized in local issues that serve your community can be incredibly helpful right now”).

VIVIAN SMING, FOUNDER OF SMING SMING BOOKS, saw her early pandemic experience as part of a larger cultural collapse brought on by the Bay Area’s increasing economic stratification. Sming was an editor at *Art Practical*, an important hub for art criticism in Northern California that had struggled to survive even before Covid-19 hit, and paused publication in April 2020. “Instead of trying to find or negotiate prospects, we realized there were no prospects,” Sming said. Heartbroken about the decline of criticism, she didn’t feel optimistic about the sustainability of art publishing either. She narrowed her editorial focus on her own imprint, which she started in 2017. Describing her publications as “what art exhibitions without the accumulation of wealth might look like,” Sming seeks out artists who are “interested in a way of sharing their work in a more equitable format that builds community.” She wasn’t surprised that this motivation only increased during the pandemic. More surprising was her realization that “the pandemic and the racial reckoning in the summer really pushed people toward books.” Her sales for the year increased dramatically, by about 150 percent. Knowing that the Black Lives Matter protests attracted people to her books in June, Sming donated proceeds from all the sales that month to the Black Trans Coalition. Levine’s *This Is Not a Gun* is already in its second printing, and the video for the LA Art Book Fair has been watched almost six hundred times.

Aay Preston-Myint, cofounder of the Chicago Art Book Fair, wasn’t surprised that many community-minded imprints were “ready” with material when the pandemic hit. Describing independent publishers as rejects — “people who have been rejected by racism, by sexism, by wealth barriers” — Preston-Myint emphasized that they had left the art world seeking not independence but, rather, other forms of community. They have been fighting isolation for a long time.

He wasn’t surprised that publishers were good at finding ways to keep doing their work. Again, Preston-Myint traced this resiliency and flexibility back to people’s motivations for entering publishing in the first place. “Publishing has always been about experimentation in format, and that has carried into the way people have coped,” he said. “The main reasons why a lot of people get into art publishing have been amplified by the pandemic.” Community hubs of various kinds were collapsing, including small bookstores. Forced to isolate, people were longing for communication and cultural contact. Because printers were considered essential workers and the postal service kept delivering packages, Preston-Myint said, books could still circulate.

The Chicago Art Book Fair wasn’t set up on any growth model, “so it wasn’t really a problem for us to take a year off for our own health and safety,” Preston-Myint said. Pointing out that independent art publishing communities had been getting established



for a number of years before the pandemic, Preston-Myint notes that people have been able to sustain those connections, at least temporarily, through online events and purchases.

The crisis isn’t over. People aren’t sure how or when to move to the next phase. They feel the need to step back, reassess, and rest. An intense period of invention and adaptation naturally brings feelings of tentativeness, fatigue, and confusion. There is a longing to return to certain things as they were: travel, face-to-face conversation, handshakes, and hugs. But there’s also a desire to carry forward new practices of mutual support and virtual access. However that unfolds, Sonel Breslav is certain that future art book fairs will benefit from the past year’s innovations. “I don’t know how we could go back,” she said. ●

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Above, a mock-up for a potential cover of the first issue of Erica Dawn Lyle’s forthcoming publication, *Kyanite*, featuring a drawing by Xander Marro.