

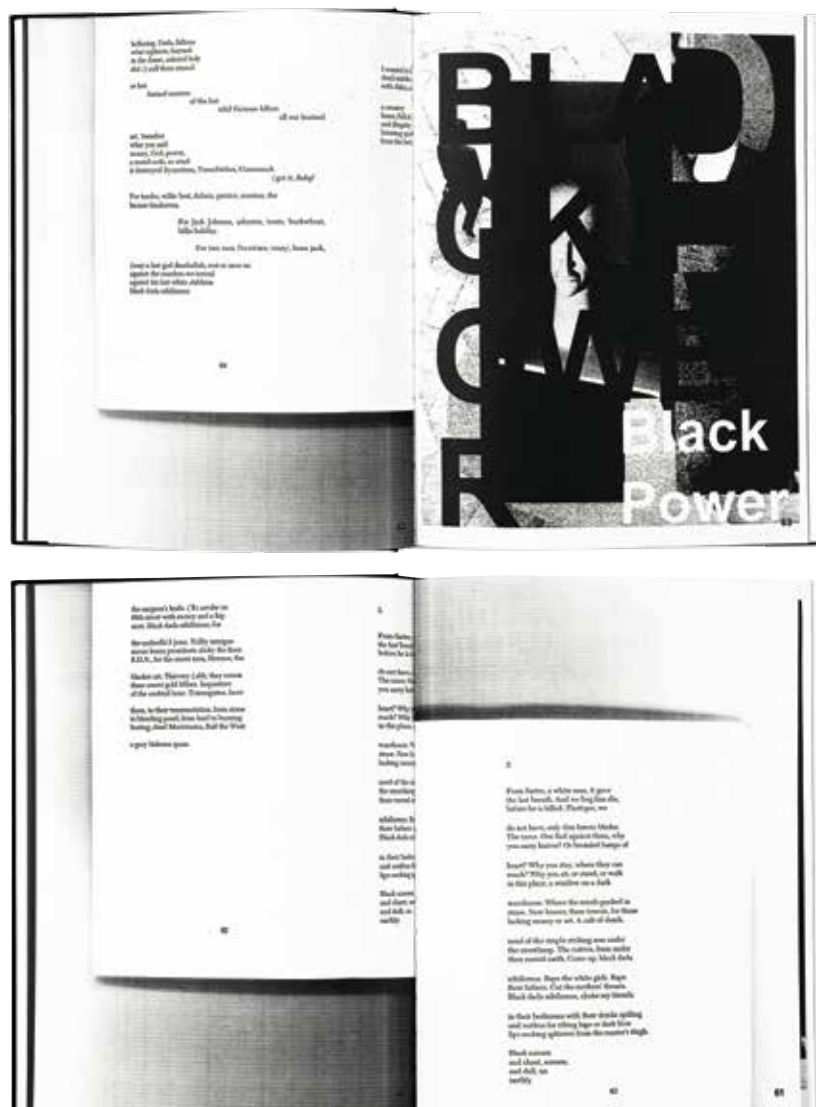
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Art in America

Summer Reading: Nora Turato + Artist Biographies + Dayanita Singh



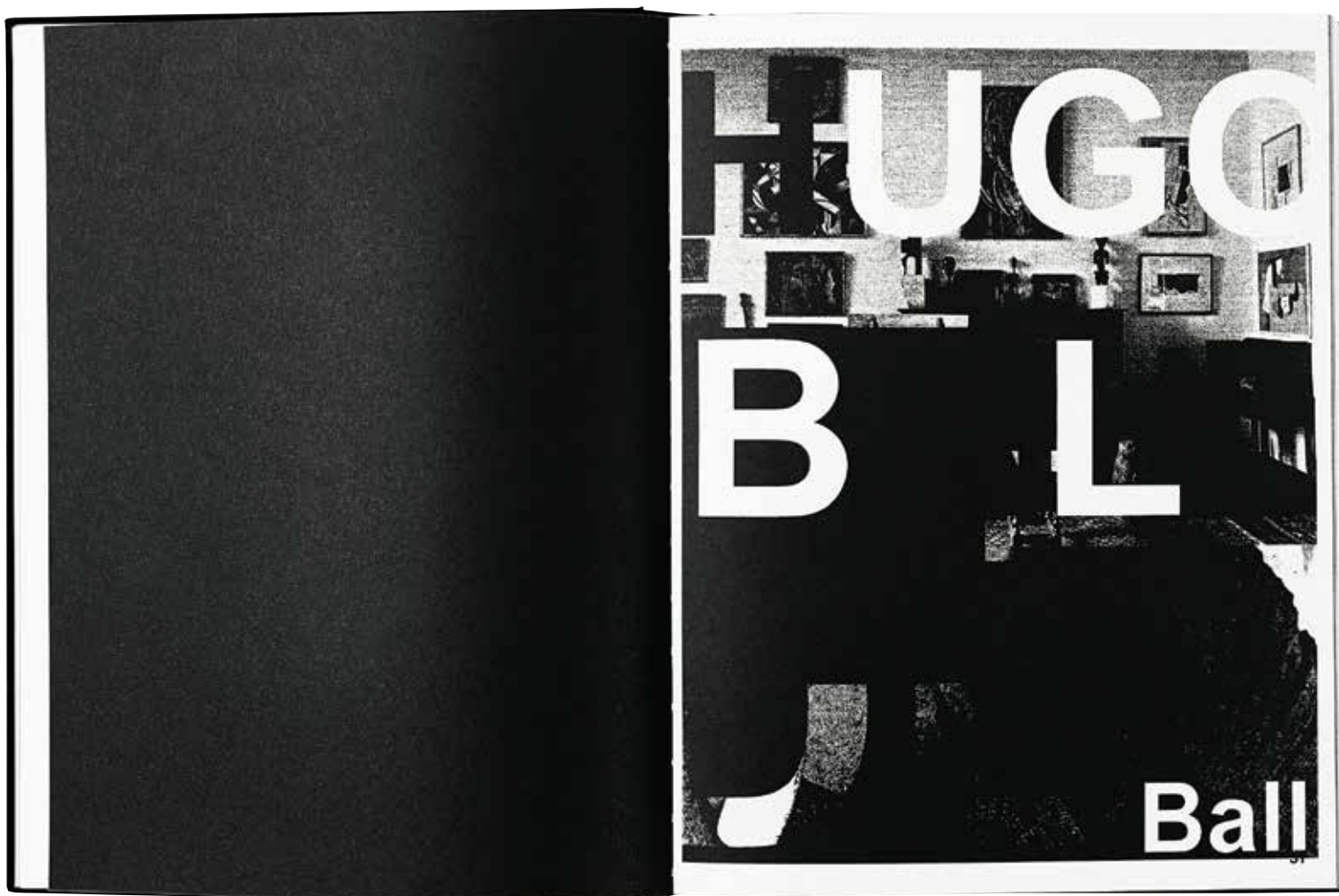
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PRINT

The return of the artist as publisher.

By Lucy Ives



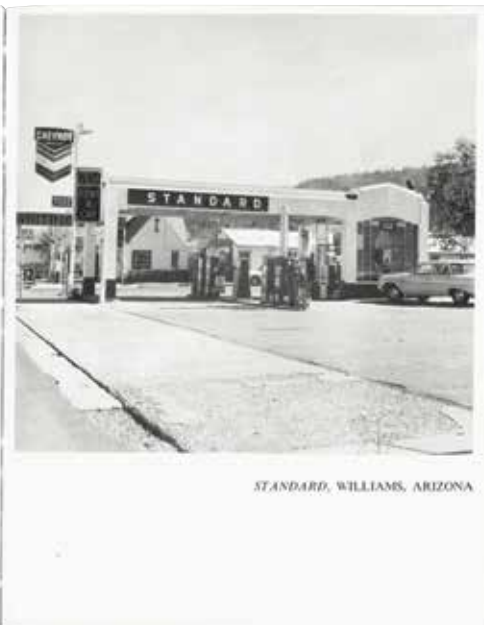
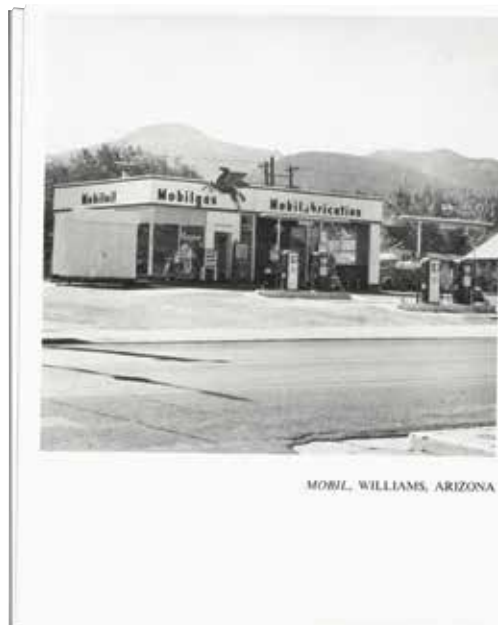
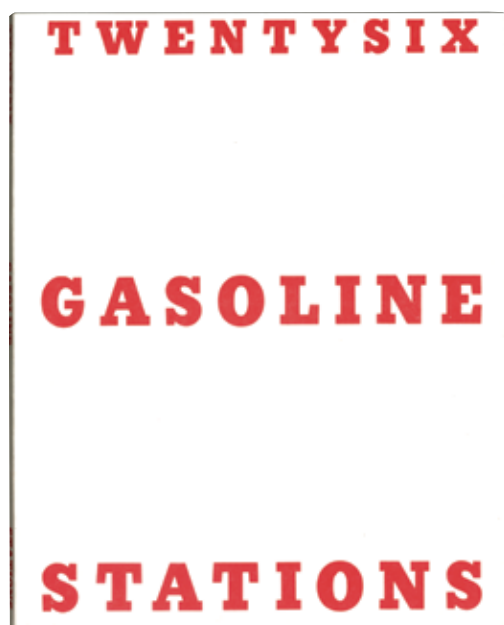
Above and opposite, two spreads from Adam Pendleton's book *Black Dada Reader*, 2017, published by Koenig Books.

IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, A NUMBER OF companies have made print-on-demand technologies available to the masses. Xlibris – which in 2000 the *New York Times* described as producing “exceptionally ugly” but occasionally “exceptional” books – appeared in 1997, with Lulu and Blurb following in 2002 and 2005, respectively. First developed in the 1980s and commercially viable by the late 1990s, print-on-demand has made it possible to produce books at a fixed price per copy regardless of run size, with low set-up costs, no inventory to store or unsold books to remainder, and, therefore, lower financial risk on the part of the publisher than traditional offset printing offers. With print-on-demand, one may print a single book profitably. A writer with a little cash and a correctly formatted file can become the author of a published book. The platforms even allocate ISBNs as part of their service.

Print-on-demand is a nexus of online distribution channels, digital archives, and printers that transform digital files into physical objects – providing a method for understanding books as a form of technology in a contemporary sense. Around the same time as the

founding of Xlibris, a former hedge-fund manager named Jeff Bezos came to the radically pragmatic conclusion that one might build a successful e-commerce corporation based in part on a series of facts about the physical nature of books: they are relatively uniform in size, easy to pack and ship, and do not shatter when dropped. In this period, the book came to be ever more intently understood as an object and a format, rather than just a vessel for a complex and possibly transcendent series of messages. The contents of a given book – its words and images – were of lesser significance in the context of Amazon’s early business model than its weight and trim size.

Print was not dying, as some predicted. Far from it: print remained a subject of keen obsession for various producers precisely because of how efficiently it meshed with digital protocols and workflows. These developments did not go unnoticed in the art world, with a wave of conceptualist practice focusing on the form of the book and related digital formats cresting in the early 2010s. At the time, a figure at once new and old appeared: the artist as publisher.



Above, the cover of Seth Price's essay *Dispersion*, first published in 2007.

Top, the cover and a spread from Ed Ruscha's book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963.

ANDRÉ BRETON IS OFTEN CITED AS HAVING proclaimed that a person “publishes to find comrades.” He may have had in mind the way small-press publishing cultivates intimate audiences—twenty or so people gathered in a room where, unlike in the lecture hall, the names of all present are mutually known. And perhaps Breton also meant that one publishes to find other people who are interested in participating in the publishing process itself. One publishes in order to collaborate and to share skills and experiences outside the walls of institutions as well as, sometimes, societal norms.

Surrealism’s Parisian publishing wing, which fostered such materially diverse projects as the modestly designed journal *La Révolution surréaliste* and the luxury bookbinding experiments of Georges Hugnet, is one highly visible instance of an artistic movement taking hold of the means of print production and circulation. One might also point to the typological innovations of Russian Constructivism. In the American context, Conceptual art inspired some of the most significant book-related innovations of the twentieth century. Here, publication was a method as well as a social and material phenomenon that artists sought to exploit and reform. Determined to produce an inexpensive and, in theory, infinitely reproducible photobook, Ed Ruscha found that photographs of gas stations were the optimal content for what became his iconic 1963 *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, while Seth Siegel developed a practice of curating group exhibitions that had no existence outside of a catalogue. In the mid-1960s, artists, designers, and editors with specific sensibilities and eccentric ends harnessed industrial printing, producing inexpensive print objects that served some of the same functions as galleries or works of art. These volumes might display works, convene audiences, or themselves become rarities to be collected. Magazines like *Aspen* (1965-71) and *Avalanche*

(1970-76) were at once the studio or white cube and the item to be seen, all rolled into one. The aura said to be lost with the proliferation of mechanically reproduced images was replaced by ubiquity, proximity, and immediacy, qualities clairvoyantly identified by Walter Benjamin that the internet now trades in unrelentingly.

Part of what a subsequent wave of publishing by so-called post-internet artists in the 2010s addressed was historically unprecedented access to the means of production by way of desktop digital tools, such as the all-powerful software InDesign. Jean Keller’s *Black Book* (2012) is an entirely black print-on-demand book made by way of Lulu.com requiring so much ink that its production cost is far higher than the \$28 purchase price, resulting in a loss rather than a profit whenever it is printed. (Keller estimates that a gallon of the ink used to print the book costs \$4,000.) This artist’s book foregrounds the automation of the publishing process by Lulu: despite the book’s threat to the platform’s solvency, its price, set by Keller, has not been raised, nor has it been removed from the site. *The Black Book* asks the reader to contemplate the manner in which the opportunity to self-publish is monetized and marketed by corporate actors, who produce hundreds of thousands of books without reading or vetting a single one. This allegedly democratizing trend—the confluence of digital formats, “prosumer” tools, and industrial printing—could be seen as ironically and somewhat tragically contributing to a new level of atomization and privatization of the public sphere.

Among the most notable artist projects to reflect on these developments in media is Seth Price’s *Dispersion* (2007), an installation and periodically updated essay published as a PDF as well as in print. Price argues that it is crucial for artists to “keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion” of digital media. Because the public sphere has now been folded into digital networks and formats, artists have to find



Left top and bottom, Jean Keller: *The Black Book*, 2012.

Below, Tauba Auerbach: *RGB Colorspace Atlas*, 2011, digital offset print on paper with airbrushed cloth cover, three books, 8 by 8 by 8 inches each.



ways to coopt these products in order to wrest political power from unscrupulous actors. To paraphrase media theorist Neil Postman, although media formats have never been disconnected from social life or the course of human history, new platforms and capabilities do not merely add to existing protocols and possibilities but change the entire ecosystem.

Since the first publication of Price's essay, it has become only more pressing to think through the ever-

accelerating opportunism of corporate and political actors who devote themselves to weaponizing what Price terms "distributed media," given the ongoing proliferation of mis- and disinformation online, along with erosion of the last vestiges of privacy and the unsustainable demands made on citizens' attention spans and time. Yet, keeping up with the billionaires, tech giants, and dark money may not be the only option. Maybe it's better to go flexible, minor, intimate.

TAUBA AUERBACH, WHO BEGAN PUBLISHING via their own imprint, Diagonal Press, in 2013, has a multivalent practice that frequently incorporates ways of working that might fall under the categories of graphic design and bookbinding. As their recent survey exhibition "S v Z" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art made clear, Auerbach has for years been preoccupied with the slippages between formats and disciplines. But rather than read a given format as a mode of control, Auerbach sees it as an opportunity for intense cooperation and collective problem solving, an artifact of intersections of design, visual art, and histories thereof, a sort of pleat in human practice and cultural transmission. Formats, for Auerbach, are often more or less successful bulwarks against other dynamics and qualities of physical reality. They are attempts at making the chaotic universe more legible and navigable. They parcel out and assist perception in specific ways, and they can therefore be tinkered with in order to reveal how the senses are implicated in our politics.

Auerbach's *RGB Colorspace Atlas* (2011), a set of three digital offset printed books, is a play on the possibilities of the codex. With its unwieldy 8-by-8-by-8-inch size, each book is less transportable than a standard paperback but nevertheless permits the viewer to closely study shifts and subtleties in the RGB gradient, the color model used for electronic systems. Each book contains 3,712 pages, and each page is densely printed with a partial representation of the RGB color space. Lying open with their pages flat, these semi-sculptural





Left, the June 2021 page from a calendar published by Diagonal Press.

Below, Z-Helix rolling papers sold by Diagonal Press.

Right, Tauba Auerbach's book *There Have Been and Will Be Many San Franciscos*, 2016, published by Diagonal Press.

publications describe a possible three-dimensional mapping of the much-used color model – as if the blank books had passed through a cloud of evenly distributed colors, becoming dyed in the process.

If the pages are examined one by one, however, the color mapping becomes legible across each surface, much like a text, the usual content of a book. Thus, the atlases render the color model as an object for looking at *and* as an object for reading, an effect that becomes more meaningful and potentially unnerving when one considers that studies have shown that women are able to perceive more colors than men. While the RGB colorspace usually functions as a paradigm for the representation of color, with only its standardizing effects visible, Auerbach's *Atlas* transforms this set of

parameters into a sensuous content, a thingly color space that can be readily experienced and discussed.

Although this project does not appear under the Diagonal Press imprint, it is certainly a book-object the artist renders public through its presentation in the relatively intimate space of the gallery and via more widely circulated digital images. (Indeed, while technically a group of objects, the *Atlas* may be the best-known image Auerbach has created.) As with Keller's *Black Book*, it serves as an example of an artist creating a publication to comment on the means of production. But Auerbach goes a step further by running their own publishing concern and acting as printer, as well as creating fashion and lifestyle merchandise in addition to books.

Auerbach's publishing methods point out aspects of print production and distribution that often go unacknowledged. On the website for Diagonal Press, Auerbach has published a "Physical Site History" that details the history of the land, building, and unit (118



Forsyth Street #1 in Manhattan) where the press is located, beginning with BEFORE 10,000 BCE – a time to which one can trace back "evidence of first human inhabitants in this region." Subsequent dates detail the presence of the Lenni Lenape in lower Lenapehoking (an area including the site of the present-day Lower East Side), the violence and thefts perpetrated by successive waves of Dutch and English colonizers, as well as the eventual construction of the building itself in 1911, "in the space of six months, costing \$45,000." The press is thus presented as being ambitiously aware of the temporal and spatial contexts in which it operates – as well as concerned with its own archival function, particularly given that print objects have a capacity to serve as carriers of historiographic data.

The press's publications are also issued in open editions to ensure that their value is not tied to rareness and that they remain relatively accessible. A box of rolling papers printed with images of helixes, one of Auerbach's geometric obsessions, costs \$5, for example, while a copy of Auerbach's own *There Have Been and Will Be Many San Franciscos* (2016), a book cut by hand and produced on demand, is priced at \$260, a far cry from



The cover and three spreads from N.H. Pritchard's 1971 book *EECCHHOOEES*, republished by DABA in 2021.

the prices that the artist's work usually commands. As Auerbach writes of their love of designing typefaces, "I've never sold fonts for use because the letters feel very personal – like visualizations of my voice." The same seems to be true of the press's many products: these "feel very personal," as if the recipient of a calendar or bandana might become part of a loosely affiliated community through their purchase and use of the item.

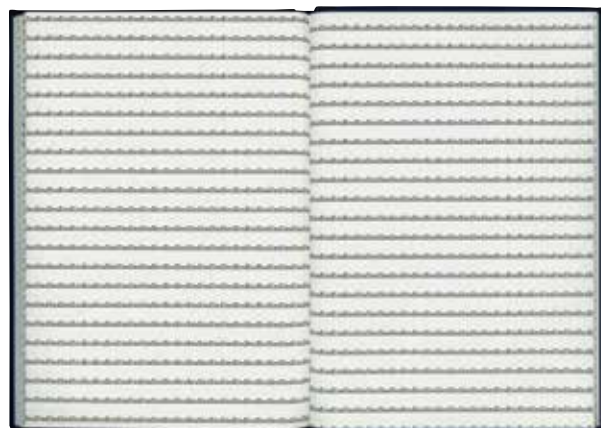
Adam Pendleton is another artist with a significant institutional presence who is both a practicing publisher and someone who uses printing and other reproductive techniques throughout his work. In 2017 he published the *Black Dada Reader*, a compilation of Xeroxed texts that formed a sort of intellectual and personal commonplace book, at first shared with friends and close associates. The anthology functioned as a reframing device for conversations taking place in institutions – emphasizing the context of current anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements – even as it supported efforts in the art community to understand how earlier social justice movements resonated with "post-internet" conceptual art. Recalling at once a zine, a political pamphlet, and a pre-digital academic course pack, the *Black Dada Reader* caused recipients to reflect on how information and ideas related to taste and exclusion move from peer to peer.

Pendleton's anthology complicated excessively dry discussions of format that did not take social

and historical contexts into account. It addressed racism and anti-Blackness. At the same time, it caused readers to confront the chromatic qualities of print, particularly the visual pleasure of toner, with its density and characteristic physical dynamics, along with the glossiness of the Xeroxed image. The *Black Dada Reader* was also a binding gesture – literally binding pages but also bringing together American and European avant-gardes, compiling a poetics related to materiality and political resistance, and convening such authors as Hugo Ball and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).

In 2021 Pendleton began producing print books and other items through his DABA Press, which, according to the website, "seeks to assemble art, language, and ideas from a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts, with an interest in the relationships between conceptual practices, Blackness, and the avant-garde." The works assembled, reproduced, and distributed by DABA evince an approach to American culture that privileges frequently marginalized and/or repudiated genres and authors. They imagine a new sort of reader: one capable of moving freely between the lexical demands made by challenging poems to those made by writers calling for social liberation.

DABA is also operating in the longer context of concretism: its first release was a new edition of N.H. Pritchard's typographically and sonically exquisite work of concrete poetry *EECCHHOOEES*, first released in 1971; the press recently published Brion Gysin's *Permutations*, a collection of poetic syntactical variations composed between 1958 and 1982. Concrete poetry, memorably defined by the Brazilian writer Augusto de Campos as the "tension of thing-words in space-time," calls our attention to the page as a mediated space that acts both as a support for legible language and as a material drag on the process of signification. The meanings of concrete poems cannot be separated from their identities as visual and/or voiced, time-based works. By recirculating the work of figures like Pritchard and Gysin, Pendleton underlines avant-garde literature's ability to identify politically significant kinds of ambiguity; uncertainties and illegibilities inherent to the media we consume and the languages we speak. In Gysin's *Permutations*, for example, the rearrangement of the short assertion



“I AM THAT I AM” reveals complementary as well as apparently contradictory meanings such as “AM I THAT AM I” (“Am I that? Am I?”).

Whereas Auerbach often focuses on the act of looking through the form of the publications they create, Pendleton returns his audiences again and again to the power of reflective, personally directed reading and to the particularities and peculiarities of words. He reminds us that reading, like words themselves, may be simultaneously private and public, depending on how one shares what one has read. His work therefore revises and perhaps concretizes Breton’s statement about publishing: Pendleton publishes to help comrades find one another, to synthesize past works, and to create intimacy in the present. He thinks carefully about the dynamics of hosting, and his research concerns philosophy’s social status as an ongoing collaborative project. Yet this partly theoretical consideration of what is social about writings related to art always remains partially couched in other terms: one of the great strengths of Pendleton’s approach is that he makes all his arguments materially and pragmatically. He creates an actual anthology, a real event, a visitable site, a palpable gesture, a field of paint. The words he shares are never divorced from physical context and are sometimes even obscured by the media by means of which they are portrayed.

The artist Martine Syms’s practice presents an illuminating contrast to that of both Auerbach and Pendleton, because so much of her output is related to moving images: video and streaming formats, the defunct social media platform Vine (whose memory has been elided by the functionally similar and now ultra-successful TikTok), and the television and movie industries. Yet she is also the founder of the book- and

merchandise-focused press Dominica Publishing, “an imprint dedicated to exploring blackness as a topic, reference, marker, and audience in visual culture.”

Two of Dominica’s best-known book works are artist’s writings by Syms’s contemporaries: Diamond Stingily’s *Love, Diamond* (2014) and Hannah Black’s *Dark Pool Party* (2016), both now out of print and available only as high-priced rarities. *Love, Diamond*, which contains entries from a diary that Stingily kept from the age of eight, can be read as a book but may also be unfolded into a poster. The entries are brief but consuming; she reflects on her family life in ways that reveal how the work of understanding herself as a social and ethical being is tied to learning how to construct sentences and choose names for events and things. Black’s slim bound book, meanwhile, contains some of the most deft observations about the intersections of affect and politics written in American English in the twenty-first century. As Black notes, “Perhaps critique is over and this is unexpectedly the era of joy, but I am still luxuriating in the interesting feeling of shame.” *Dark Pool Party* blends the genres of memoir, short story, aphorism, and essay, incorporating styles of expression from online culture and Continental philosophy alike. Like *Love, Diamond*, *Dark Pool Party* treats the self as a work in progress, an undertaking often intruded on by power, history, celebrity, and capital. Both texts reveal the necessity of an intimate, antinomian shaping of language and narrative – materials one has not chosen but must employ all the same – in order to create a habitable sense of self and biography in the present.

Syms said in a 2016 interview in *ARTnews* that working with video is related to publishing given the “sequential similarities” between the practices, their reliance on a narrative trajectory, and a viewer/

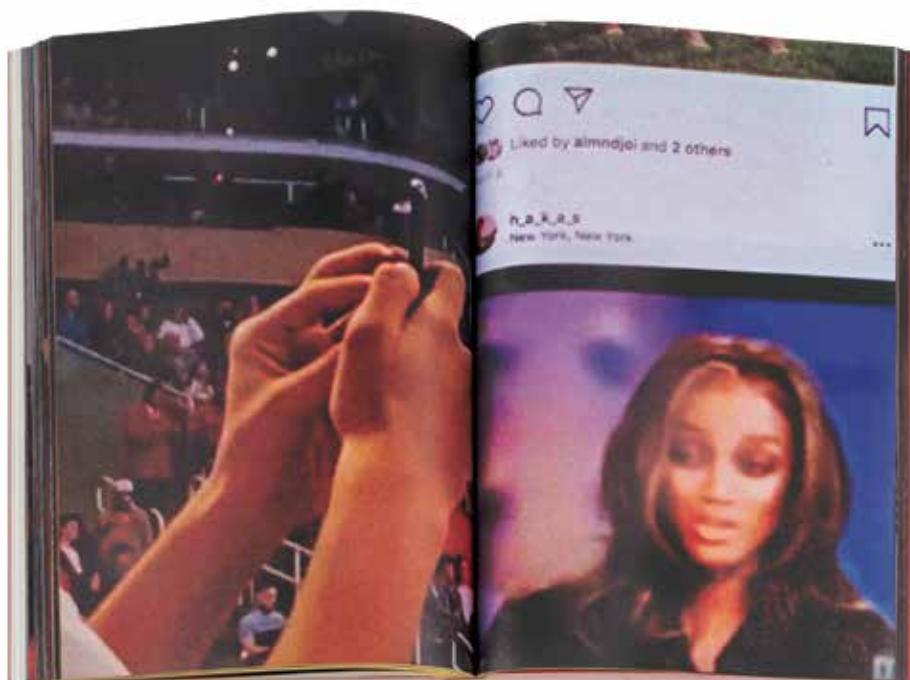


Above, the cover of Diamond Stingily’s book *Love, Diamond*, 2014, published by Dominica Publishing.

Below, Martine Syms: *Notes on Gesture*, 2015, video, 10 minutes, 27 seconds.



Stingily: Courtesy Dominica Publishing and Bridget Donahue, New York; Syms: Courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York



reader who is “carried through the material.” Her *Notes on Gesture* (2015) is a ten-minute video in which she collaborates with Stingily, who performs small gestures that are repeated as loops with overlays of text and sound. At once jarring and meditative, the piece asks the viewer to study gestures at length, providing little guidance as to whether the movements in question are personal or part of a broadly shared language. Attempting to parse Stingily’s gesticulations with and against the words flashing on screen or repeated via the soundtrack, the viewer – also a reader – must make determinations about what is specific and what general, which movements pertain to a communal sphere and which are unique expressions of emotion.

Notes on Gesture is, in its own way, a publication: like many of the artworks discussed here, it construes gallery space as a site for conversation about perceptual differences, as well as how value is assigned. Syms – who has described herself as a “conceptual entrepreneur,” as is often noted in press about her work – observes how individuals are invited to perform as well as to recognize others in limiting and limited ways in contemporary media environments. Her work makes use not of appropriation, per se, but of what we might consider reenactments; she has created semi-autobiographical narratives from Octavia Butler’s writings, for example, publishing these as stories and audio monologues. Like Stingily, Syms has also collected her own diary entries alongside images derived from a personal archive for her book *Shame Space* (2020), published by Primary Information. Overall, her work is concerned as much with archiving as creating, and asks us to consider what it may mean for our memories and identities that there is little ready distinction to be drawn between these two acts today.

Above and below, spreads from Martine Syms’s book *Shame Space*, 2020, published by Primary Information.

INSTABILITY IS AN UNHAPPY WORD WE SEEM TO love to repeat nevertheless and a phenomenon we fear. It is not a good default condition for media and even worse for nation states. It seems to be with us more than ever, in part because the contemporary public sphere is so given over to polarities. Where digital media is concerned, we live in a time of simultaneous ubiquity and scarcity. We possess tons of external memory but no certainty regarding how long the formats we have employed will continue to be viable.

Given this uncertainty, it is worth noting that many of the most useful and exciting cues about how to read are coming from visual art rather than literary publishing or academia, an institutional shift that should be more closely tracked. The artist publishers described here participate in this shift by fashioning texts and objects that transform the act of reading, along with the act of looking. When they publish in print, they tend to remind us of the anarchival quality of the web, its fundamental instability, given its dependence on electricity, as well as its ongoing commercialization and the problematic nature of the cryptocurrencies that increasingly influence its future.

To publish in print is old fashioned, yes. It is also physical, haptic, olfactory, slow. And when artists act as publishers they tend to refuse the traditional boundaries of genre as well as absolutist distinctions between image and word, figure and ground. They imagine a reader who is sensuously aware, rather than paranoid or anxious. Perhaps the notion of such a reader seems like a utopian or foolish proposition – or perhaps it’s a chance for a livable politics. ●

LUCY IVES writes frequently on art. Her third novel, *Life Is Everywhere*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in October 2022.

