

*The Small Press Model*, Simon Cutts (Uniformbooks)

One branch of small press publishing is the fine art object, often co-existent with individually designed, sometimes handprinted and/or bound, often produced in a kind of opposition to the scruffy pamphlet, offset and digital print-on-demand publications, and the ubiquitousness of online texts. In the last decade there has been a renewed interest in crafted books, limited editions, the book as object, not just a container of stories or poems. Simon Cutts, of course, has always been ahead of this curve. Since the mid 1960s he has, often through his Coracle Press imprint, been making beautifully designed and crafted books and objects, but he was also thinking and writing about what he published and how he did so. *The Small Press Model* gathers up some of his articles and 'attempts to group together approaches to the physicality of the book'.

I must confess that although I like beautiful books and own some wonderful fine art and poetry volumes, I tend towards the idea that the text should in some ways be tough enough to survive most forms of reproduction and dissemination, especially when price comes in to play. I'm sure I am not alone as a writer in having to decide whether one wants readers or book sales, affordable paperbacks or collector's editions. I guess I have a foot in several camps, currently enjoying the lo-fi photocopying production of Smallminded Books and Analogue Flashback pamphlets; happy to accept that online publication is publication and offers easy access to large numbers of readers; and pleased with the good-looking trade editions that Shearsman Books produces for their authors, including me. Whilst I am appreciative of the likes of Guillemot Press whose design and production ethos have not pushed the cost of their books out of reach, I dislike preciousness, and have little time for authors who worry about half a millimetre here or there when it is not vital to the work itself. And whilst I am occasionally put off reading a book by the paper use – when it veers towards newsprint or that awful laid paper that was in vogue for a while – if it's well laid out and readable that's all I require.

I don't know much about Coracle books beyond the name. I own a copy of Jonathan Williams' *Portrait Photographs*, mainly because I like some of the writers pictured (including Thomas Merton, Basil Bunting, Guy Davenport and Charles Olsen), and I briefly spoke to Cutts at the last Small Press fair I attended, pre-pandemic, at the Conway Hall in London. In my mind he is part of a small group that includes Thomas A. Clarke and Ian Hamilton Finlay. As publishers that group containing Coracle and Moschatel might perhaps also include Five Seasons Press and their design and printing work for Alan Halsey at West House Books and many others. I'm sure there are other kindred fugitive presses I don't know about. In Cutts' work at Victor Miro Gallery and his own Coracle Gallery, Thomas A and Laurie Clarke's Cairn Gallery activities and Hamilton Finlay's sculpture garden we are offered another way to consider that group, as curators and artists. Hamilton Finlay's garden is of course sculptural, very present as object, whilst Miro and Cairn often veer towards conceptual and minimal work. Cairn showed early wax and wood wall sculptures by Andrew Bick, Cutts has been involved with Roger Ackling, who marked found wood with light, burning lines into them, evidencing the passage of time as well as the artist's intervention. The Cairn Gallery website today positions itself via a quote as an oasis; its small quiet white space is often home to one or two small works of art or interventions.

There is an inclination towards focus and simplicity here. Even artist Andy Goldsworthy went conceptual for a show at Coracle Gallery, cutting a hole in the floor rather than constructing a piece from or in the landscape as is his usual practice. However, all too often with this kind of work (I mean in general, not just Goldsworthy), I come up against one of two problems: either that work has to be explained, which often negates the work itself; or that the work is too simple, with not enough to hold my attention. When repetition and simplicity works, in art or text, then fantastic. But sometimes art or writing is reduced to mind games, verbal or visual tricks, or the simple fact that something fascinates somebody else in a way it doesn't others. I'm afraid Simon Cutts is clearly someone I don't seem to share many interests with. My favourite piece in the book is also reproduced on a postcard that was included in my parcel: Les Coleman's 1975 sculpture 'Three Jam Jars', which consists of two smashed jam jars placed in the undamaged third. But there's not much more to say about it, and it's not particularly original or profound; in fact it's easy to associate it with the last book I reviewed, Katie Treggiden's *Broken*, an exploration of artists', curators' and makers' resistance to our throwaway world.

Part of the problem with this book is, of course, that I don't know the work being discussed and written about. Whilst both Andrew Bick's work (from back in the 1980s up to and including the present) and Roger Ackling's work (throughout his career) are complex and interesting enough for prolonged engagement, much here isn't. Richard Long's 'Stone Field' may have been fantastic to visit at the time but it is mostly of interest here – via a small black & white photograph – in relation to his much wider practice, his walks, documentation, exhibitions and catalogues. However, most of Cutts' book remains focussed on publishing or small press activities, although sometimes he is prone to stating the obvious:

Coracle books remain almost clandestine, shelved in our barn in rural Tipperary. They circulate via the occasional book fair, general travel and demonstration, the intermittent website listing, but mostly see the light through prepared lists for particular libraries and individuals.

Substitute any small press name for 'Coracle books' and that press' stock location for 'our barn in rural Tipperary' and you have the small press world summarised in two sentences.

So what else makes small press different, now that more than a few mainstream publishers use print-on-demand and no longer require warehouse space or huge London offices? I certainly enjoyed my last few years of running Stride Books because print-on-demand meant it was easy to survive without arts council grants, there was no gambling on short or large print runs, and instead of warehousing and shipping bills, the printers and online bookstores dealt with most of it and transferred sales money each month. Of course, none of this changed the fact that marketing and publicity are what most small presses aren't much good at. Or the fact that even when one took that on, producing advance information sheets and cover designs, quotes and biographies for reps and catalogues, as well as organizing book launches and promotional material, the mainstream book industry still wasn't very interested. But the likes of the aforementioned Guillemot and the very different Broken Sleep Books are examples of current presses who are able to successfully use social

media and online events to market their publications, even as the old bookshop and independent bookfair models become more and more outdated.

I bought this book because there was talk at work of me having to teach a hands-on publishing module to our student first years, following on from a theoretical one they take in the first semester. It is not what I expected it to be, and it turns out I am not teaching that module after all. Neither does it seem, to me, to discuss 'the physicality of the book' in anything other than terms of artists' books, and whilst it may question some of 'the wider ideas surrounding publishing and publication' it remains aloof from over two decades worth of discussion about publishing in the age of the internet, the global marketplace, and print-on-demand technologies, not to mention each individual's ability to create their own outlet, platform or space to disseminate their own work, be that performance, text, film, visual art or some hybrid practice. What it does offer is a personal and reflective history of Simon Cutts' work as curator, publisher, promoter and thinker. That in itself, rather than 'The form of a book as a metaphorical structure for the poem' is reason enough to buy this intriguing, sometimes rather insular, book.

Rupert Loydell

(1425 words)