

Portrait of

the Artist

as

a Publisher:

Publishing

as an

Alternative

Artistic Practice

Antoine Lefebvre

In November 2014, I finished a PhD dissertation titled “Portrait of the Artist as a Publisher: Publishing as an Alternative Artistic Practice,”¹ and this idea of alternative art became a focus of my research.² This PhD thesis is research of a special kind, which does not exist in most countries, as it is neither the research of art history nor art philosophy, but the research of visual art, made from an artist researcher’s point of view. The hardest part of this exercise is that you have to elaborate theory by studying your own artistic practice, which is often influenced by the theory you are reading and the ideas you are developing. Knowing this, I created *La Bibliothèque Fantastique* (or *LBF*) in 2009, a publishing structure for artist books that issued more than a hundred artists’ publications until I decided to end it in 2013 to focus on the writing of my dissertation.

The specificity of *LBF* is that its publications are free and downloadable from a website³ so that everyone can print them at home. Most of these books are exclusive productions. The others are reprints of works that are important for the history of artists’ publications. The purpose of *LBF* is to offer a view on books expressed by books themselves. Its works are made of excerpts of other works, with pages, sentences, and words met in a stroke of good fortune. *LBF* is an artistic venture, a commercial artwork, and a laboratory for my research that allowed me to create new artworks by over thirty different artists. The main question I tried to answer researching my own artistic practice is: Why, and more importantly, how is this publishing work an artwork? This is how I discovered that publishing could be considered as an alternative artistic practice. Since Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made, it doesn’t seem like an artist has to prove that something is an artwork, he just has to say so. But it was important for me to find out what could make this project art in the eyes of others. Should it be because my role as a publisher is creative, because the books are shown in an exhibition setting, or because they express a strong voice, as an artist would do in his work? To answer that, I focused on showing how this approach could be considered an alternative, and tried to create a definition of the artist publisher that I hope other artist publishers will see themselves in.

As intertextuality is one of the important concepts in this research, it was important to me that the form of the dissertation could create connections

between books. The dissertation is 750 pages, which I divided into four volumes in a silkscreen case. Each of them carries different types of information and complements one another. The first is a catalog of all the publications and ephemera produced by *LBF* during its four years of existence. Each of the publications is presented with a reproduction of its cover, a full bibliographic reference and a small presentation text. The texts are not explanations that one would need to read in order to understand the works, but rather anecdotes and background history that led to the creation of those specific artworks. This volume is the best

1 Antoine Lefebvre, “Portrait of the Artist as a Publisher, Publishing as an Alternative Artistic Practice” (Ph.D. diss., Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 2014), <http://labibliothequefantas.free.fr/index.php?/thesis>.

2 Alternative art is here intended as a type of art that can exist outside of the traditional system of art (i. e., the art market, the art object, the institutions, and even outside of the representation).

source of information on the books of *LBF* as most of them don't have a colophon and very few paratext.

The second volume is composed of interviews conducted with eight people who I consider good representatives of alternative art. Those persons are not necessarily artists, but their actions within art contribute to show a different side of art, or to bring art where it hasn't been before. This volume gives a definition of alternative art through a wide range of examples, as these eight people work to change the definition of art and to make it broader. They are Ben Kinmont (artist, publisher, and antiquarian bookseller), Matthew Stadler (writer and co-founder of Publication Studio), Filip Noterdaeme (artist, writer, and director of the Homeless Museum of Art), Bettina Funcke (writer and co-founder of the Continuous Project group), Ghislain Mollet-Viéville (art agent⁴), Dana Wyse (artist), Bernard Brunon (artist and house painter) and Jean-Claude Moineau (art theoretician). All the interviewees tend to create their own status by mixing activities that one wouldn't think compatible. The result of their actions is always an extended definition of art.

The third volume presents photographic documents showing how *LBF* books have been displayed in fairs, exhibitions, shops and other places. Displaying books in an exhibition white cube is complicated for three reasons: first, people are not used to touching objects in an exhibition space; second, an exhibition is usually not a comfortable place to read; and third,

the books that you allow people to touch should be replaceable, as they will surely be damaged. The solution I found was to hang the *LBF* books on nails, so visitors could take them in their hands and browse through them. The printed books are hole punched in the upper left corner so they can be taken off the wall and read. They are hung regularly to fill all available space so the library can spread (fig. 1).⁵ As the files for the books are freely downloadable, there are no "original" copies of the books of *LBF*, so the displayed copies are printed each time by the venue producing the installation.

The fourth volume is the actual thesis, an attempt to create a definition of the "artist publisher" using the experience of *La Bibliothèque Fantastique* as a basis for my research. The following quote from "La Bibliothèque Fantastique" ("The Fantasia of the Library") by Michel Foucault was an important inspiration to me, as I used it as a guide to create *LBF*:

"The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in the documents. Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading;

3 "La Bibliothèque Fantastique," accessed August 11, 2015, www.labibliothequefantastique.net.

4 For Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, an art agent is someone who advocates for a particular vision of art, in his case conceptual dematerialized art. Since 1975, Mollet-Viéville has been a great support for several generations of French conceptual artists by offering them a place to experiment in his own apartment. His old apartment is now restaged in the Mamco museum in Geneva as part of the permanent collection with all the conceptual and minimal artworks of his collection. See <http://www.conceptual-art.net/>, accessed September 29, 2015.

5 "A library is print in its gaseous state filling every available space, and then increasing the pressure." Craig Dworkin, *The Perverse Library* (York: Information as Material, 2010), 14.



Fig. 1. Installation for the video presentation of *La Bibliothèque Fantastique*, New York 2012. Photo: Lucie Rocher, CC-BY-SA, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0>.

and a true image is now a product of learning: it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the impossible. Only the assiduous clamor created by repetition can transmit to us what only happened once. The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library.”

6 Michel Foucault, “The Fantasia of the Library” (1967), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 87–109, 90–91. A bilingual version of this text is available on the LBF website.

Michel Foucault, “The Fantasia of the Library,” 1967.⁶



Fig. 2. Installation *Ligne éditoriale & La Tentation de saint Antoine*, made for the PhD presentation, Paris 2014. Photo: Antoine Lefebvre, CC-BY-SA, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0>.

The photos of the installation I did for the defense of my dissertation can be informative in explaining how this Foucault text influenced my publishing process. This installation is composed of two overlapping elements: a line made out of all the books of *LBF* hung chronologically on nails, and underneath them, a series of giant photocopies of nineteenth century engravings (fig. 2). These are the images that Foucault had printed

7 Michel Foucault, afterword to *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*, by Gustave Flaubert, (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1964), 217–251.

8 There is no English translation of this work by Creuzer to my knowledge. The title would translate as *Symbolism and mythology of the ancient peoples, particularly the Greeks*. The French version read by Flaubert was translated from the German by Joseph Daniel Guigniaut: *Friedrich Creuzer, Religions de l'antiquité, Considérées principalement dans leurs formes symboliques et mythologiques*, vol. 4, part 2, (Paris: Kossbühl, 1841).

alongside his text since the very first publication in 1964 as an afterword to the German translation of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Gustave Flaubert.⁷ In his text, Foucault demonstrates how Flaubert's book is made out of myths and characters borrowed from books of the writer's library. Flaubert especially used the book of the German archeologist Friedrich Creuzer *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*⁸ where the tenth and last volume is composed of engravings representing all the gods from all around the world who come to attempt to make Saint Anthony lose faith. This book was a great source of inspiration for Flaubert, who used these reproductions to nourish the description of Saint Anthony's temptations. This process is what Foucault calls in his text "a phenomenon of the library," a combination of a lot of books from the writer's personal library mixed to make a new book.

The first part of the thesis is built like a mystery novel around the death of the author. It starts by a discovery made by a key witness: the librarian, whose position allows him to see the disappearance of the author first hand. The main idea of this first part is that this intertextual work that Flaubert did and that Foucault calls a phenomenon is similar to the work of the publisher who organizes his publishing as an accumulation of text, title, books, covers, and authors like a librarian would. By doing so, the artist publisher creates a dialogue between these elements that is essential to creating new meaning for his artworks. These links between texts that were thoroughly studied by structuralist thinkers in the 1960s do not express themselves in the library but rather in the mind of the reader as Roland Barthes demonstrated in his famous text “The Death of the Author.”⁹ The crime scene therefore is the mind of the reader, which is for Barthes the “place where [the] multiplicity is collected, united.”¹⁰ All the *LBF* books have a cover borrowed from an existing book, because a certain amount of

appropriation is indispensable to create new meaning between books. But these mechanisms of appropriation challenge the notion of authorship. This type of interaction between texts and books does not leave books unharmed and the biggest victim of this game is the author whose very existence is threatened by the appropriation phenomenon.

The appropriation is the murder weapon by which the author came to die. But it is also the tool that will bring an unexpected twist to this story: the author is not dead! His presence continues to haunt us like a ghost as he rises from the dead as a meta-author. Indeed, in his “Metaphysical Principles of Law,” Kant defines the book as “a Writing which contains a Discourse addressed by some one to the Public, through visible signs of Speech.” He therefore defines the author as “he who speaks to the public in his own name.” Kant then gives a definition of the publisher, which makes him a meta-author: “He who addresses the writing to the public in the name of the author is the publisher.”¹¹ The publisher is therefore an author who expresses himself through authors, using their speech to build his, and the artist publisher is a meta-artist who creates his own work by arranging or curating the works of other artists.¹²

The second part of the thesis focuses on the nature of the works published by *LBF*. By developing the genealogy of these publications, I found Stéphane Mallarmé to be a precursor in the idea of authors making books, instead of just writing texts.¹³ Comparing the different definitions of artists’ books, I wanted to find the links between this particular type of artists’ publications, counter culture, and subcultures. The goal of this second part is to define a new

9 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Aspen* no. 5–6 (fall–winter 1967). See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) and Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora and Alice A. Jardine (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

10 Barthes, “The Death of the Author.”

11 Immanuel Kant, “Metaphysical Principles of Law” (1797), in *The Philosophy of Law, An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right* (Edinburgh: W. Hastie, 1887), 129–130.

12 See Hanna Kuusela’s and Annette Gilbert’s contributions in this volume.

13 In “The New Art of Making Books,” *Kontexts* no. 6–7 (1975), Ulises Carrion defines bookmaking as this: “In the old art the writer writes texts. In the new art the writer makes books.” Mallarmé would therefore be one of the first examples of this “new art of making books” that Carrion links to artists’ books. See also Antoine Lefebvre, “Portrait of the Artist,” 131–154.

category of artists' publications that resides at the intersection of artists' books and the Do It Yourself ethos. I call artzines the artists' publications that are produced in a Do It Yourself spirit and therefore belong to zines, but which also have a strong connection to contemporary art, and the history of avant-gardes.¹⁴ The artzines are a subcategory within zines, alongside punk zines, queer zines, perzines, etc., but almost all the zine categories can also be found within artzines—with a little artistic twist.

Since its inception, many critics have considered artists' publications as alternative spaces. Artist publisher Simon Cutts even called them a "critical alternative" in 1986 in the catalog of his exhibition "The Artist Publisher."¹⁵ But before him, Kate Linker had already designated the artist book as an alternative space, because it is an alternative to the exhibition space as well as to the art market.¹⁶ Barbara Moore, John Hendricks and Guy Schraenen also compared the printed page to the exhibition space and to artist-run spaces.¹⁷ But artists' publications are not alternatives only because they offer another space for art, where art can be shown on the artist's own terms. They are also an alternative, to a mainstream or dominant culture, because some of them, such as artzines, are influenced and share history with the counter-culture rebellion and some subcultures.

In the third part I define the creative process of the artist publisher as an alternative artistic practice for several different reasons. First, because creating a commercial venture as an artwork places the artist publisher in a history of artist organizations founded by artists who refused to comply with the demands of the traditional art world. Working with the Sorbonne and the CNRS Art&Flux research team was the occasion for me to address the

economic aspect of publishing, which is often idealized when it comes to artists' books. Commentators tend to see them as a very democratic form of art because they are cheap to buy. But they are only cheap from the point of view of the buyer and they are very expensive to produce for the artist, even more than traditional artworks. The Art&Flux team works, among other things, on the links between art and the economy, and especially on "artist companies" which are run by artist entrepreneurs such as Iain Baxter who created *N.E. Thing Co.* in 1963. Artist entrepreneurs often have a very critical view on the economy and try to show how it could work differently. They also choose for themselves a status that will lead them to exist inside or outside of the art world but always on their own terms.¹⁸

This idea of alternative art therefore takes many shapes, as Robert Filliou stated in his "autriste" philosophy: "Whatever you do, do something else. Whatever you think, think something else."¹⁹ Alternative art practices can be defined in many ways: as a different way of thinking as Filliou proposes, but I think that the places where they

14 See *ibid.*, 155–172.

15 Simon Cutts, *The Artist Publisher* (London: Crafts Council Gallery, 1986), 5.

16 Kate Linker, "Artist's Book as an Alternative Space," *Studio International* 990, vol. 195 (1980): 75–79.

17 Barbara Moore and John Hendricks, "The Page as Alternative Space, 1950 to 1969," in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985), 91. And Guy Schraenen, "Pour une approche des espaces alternatifs (1–4)," *Artefactum* no. 8–11 (1985–1986).

18 Yann Toma and Rose Marie Barrientos, *Les Entreprises Critiques / Critical Companies* (Saint-Etienne: Cite du design, 2008).

19 Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (Köln: Kasper Koenig, 1970), 227.

happen can also help to qualify them as such. The concept of heterotopia that Michel Foucault invented²⁰ is an accurate depiction of how artists tend to bring art into new places or “non-places,” where it has never been before. Alternative art tends to happen in unexpected places, or in places that are transformed by the action of the artist.

But it is an artist publisher, the self-proclaimed Fluxus leader George Maciunas, who brought the most relevant concept to qualify publishing as an alternative artistic practice: Concretism is a type of art that presents objects instead of representing them. To him, concretist artists: “prefer the world of concrete reality rather than the artificial abstraction of illusionism. Thus in plastic arts, for instance, a concretist perceives and expresses a rotten tomato without changing its reality of form.”²¹ This definition inspired by Duchamp helped me a lot to qualify publishing as an alternative artistic practice, as it can be considered a ready-made activity. It is a banal activity raised to the state of artwork by the will of an artist. To me, the definition of art lies within action. Because as Ernst Gombrich said: “There is no such thing as art, there are only artists.”²² Also, there is no use for ideas unless they are materialized in a form that can be communicated. Even the most abstract works of conceptual art have to be transmitted to the viewer, be it in writing or orally. *LBF* is a concretist artwork because its goal is not to give a representation of a library, as you would find in a painting, a photo, or even in some installations, but rather to create a fully functional library where the accumulation of books and titles creates a discourse.

The best example of what I call alternative art is the work of Bernard Brunon, a French artist who has been living in the U.S. since the eighties. His work fits all the criteria I have just defined, as he has founded his own artistic company to act in heterotopias, spaces that he transforms by his action. He is also a concretist artist as he has always painted avoiding representation. When Brunon was a young man studying art in France, he went the École des Beaux-Arts in Marseille to study with Claude Viallat, an artist from the Support/Surface group, known for his painting work, which questions materials in the painting process. The young Brunon was interested in Viallat’s way of thinking as he was trying to make paintings that wouldn’t be representations of anything. When Brunon went to live in Dallas, Texas for

personal reasons, he started working some odd jobs, such as painting houses, to make a living. He then realized that when he was painting a wall for one of his clients, he was finally doing what he had always tried to do in his paintings, which is to make a painting that wouldn’t be a representation. Indeed, when Brunon paints a house, he is not representing the house, but painting the world, the reality. He therefore decided that his artistic practice would be house painting, making him a sort of conceptual painter. When I asked Brunon what part of his process was art—was it the painted wall, the act of painting, his house painting

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces. Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* no. 16 (Spring 1986): 22–27.

²¹ George Maciunas, “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art” (1962), in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks (New York: MoMA 1988), 25–27.

²² Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1950), 4.

company, or the idea?—he said that all of this was his art and that he considers his whole activity as art, his “*démarche*.” The French word “*démarche*” is helpful to explain: it can be translated as approach or process, but those translations do not fully cover it. In the French word “*démarche*,” there is the verb “*marcher*,” to walk. That is why, in my work as in Brunon’s, the whole process; the whole “*démarche*” is the artwork, because it is active, ongoing, in movement. Because calling those alternative artistic practices ready-made activities isn’t quite enough, it is also the daily work of a conceptual painter or an artist publisher that proves again and again the pertinence of such approaches.

Artist publishers are expected to be more creative than regular publishers, to do things differently, in an original way. In my case, it was by allowing people to download the PDF files of my books for free that I proposed a hands-on Do It Yourself experience to my readers. It was also a way for me to print only the copies that I needed. This experience was a way of expressing my point of view on art, through an extended definition of art that can invade every aspect of life. And also a way to show what I believe to be the future of publishing: the unrestricted distribution of information (through PDF files and the Free Art License)²³ and printing on demand, which is cheap and sustainable. To give a simple definition, I would say that an artist publisher is a meta-artist whose practice is to publish both his work and the work of others. The dialogue between books is a key element for any

23 The Free Art License was created by the artists Antoine Moreau and Isabelle Vojdani with the help of lawyers. It is inspired by the world of free software and is now compatible with Creative Commons BY+SA. All the publications of *LBF* are protected by this license.

24 “How do you make a lasting meaning for readers? How do you make a readership that cares and will care over time? In short, how do you get from publishing to publication? Publication is the creation of a public; it is an essentially political act. This public, which is more than a market, is created by deliberate acts, the circulation of texts, discussions and gatherings in physical spaces, the maintenance of a digital commons.” Matthew Stadler, “Finding Your Audience in the 21st Century,” lecture at Richard Hugo House’s Writer’s Conference, May 22, 2010, online <http://vimeo.com/14888791>, accessed September 29, 2015.

publisher in order to create meaning; but it is even more important for the artist publisher to not be only a self-publisher, because artists who only publish themselves do not create a dialogue between authors, and remain in a solitary studio practice. To create intertextuality, and the “phenomenon of library” that Foucault evokes, the artist publisher selects, edits, and organizes content in order to publish it. But publishing isn’t only to print a publication or to distribute it; it is “an essentially political act,” as Matthew Stadler stated. To him, “publication is the creation of a public,” which means that an artist publisher doesn’t only have to print artworks, but also to create the conditions for other people to see them as such.²⁴

