

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE BOOK

Making Books

OSCAR TUAZON

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I WAS RAISED MAKING BOOKS. I was raised in a bookbindery, a family operation with a single cast iron nipping press and an old manual hot foil die stamp. I started out sewing spines on a wood frame, and by the time I left at eighteen I was casing in and making goatskin covers. It was a hippie operation, assembled by my father, as he says, from the second-hand tools and sketchy techniques passed on by a handful of Northwest craft binders who were all bitter drunks by the time he started the Watermark with my mother in 1973. There was a kind of craft movement in the Northwest at the time, and though I never visited another bookbindery, my parents' friends were potters, carvers, glassblowers, builders. When they started, they learned slowly and mostly on their own. They signed and numbered each book they made, and in the first year they made twelve books.

The Watermark made only blank books—photo albums, sketchbooks in a few sizes, bound in cloth covers or leather. The only printed books we made were Ship's Logs, printed with mysterious lined tables for recording tides, knots, and depth. At least that was the case by the time I was old enough to start sewing, when I was twelve or so. At the very beginning, my parents had bound a few editions of poetry, a hardbound copy of *Domebook 2*, and in one of the drawers there was a tattered folio of William Blake prints that never got bound. But custom work was too time-consuming, more trouble than it was worth, not much of a business model. So we sold blank books to a network of bookshops and

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craft galleries up and down the west coast. We got orders from North Carolina and Kansas, but not many. It was a regional product, for a regional market.

Actually we delivered most of the books ourselves. Every month or two we would load the Chevy Nova with boxes and drive an hour into Seattle, where my father would meet with five or six booksellers. Maybe once a year we took longer trips, to Portland or Vancouver. Our biggest buyer was always Elliot Bay Books in Seattle, where since the shop opened Watermark had a shelf of books at the front of the store and still does. Most of the other shops we sold to are gone, I would guess.

On a good day we probably made fifty books, on a bad day more than that; the point was to stay small enough that we never had to contract part of the process out. We finally did consent to having the pages machine-folded, but everything else we did ourselves from start to finish. The marbled paper was hand dyed at Skycraft, a small operation at the base of Mount Hood. In the beginning the only employees were my brother and I and the neighbor's son. Eventually a couple of art students came to build a cabin in the woods up the hill, and my parents hired them in shifts. It was a nice place to work, and the work was never too hard. The bindery was a single room, a bit bigger than a garage, and I would usually work there a few hours after school, everyone binding and talking politics. We were paid by the hour, until at a certain point my father realized

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he could get my brother and I to do piecework. We would go get high in the bindery after he went to bed and stay up till dawn, listening to Slayer and seeing who could sew the most books.

They were blank books, books for someone else to fill. And they were inspiring to use, with cream deckled edge cold-pressed pages. The pages weren't too heavy, and they took ink well: you could use a black pen and not worry about the ink soaking onto the next page. The covers were great. Early covers were earth-toned marbled paper, oranges and browns in free-floating plumes; later the marbling patterns were classic combed patterns in blue and violet, green and grey; finally we were using somber black on black lined with gold. Sometimes we used stamped and printed papers, and forest service maps. The covers were built from heavy bristol board, backed on the spine with bookbinders cloth in a dozen different colors. They were simple, durable books, they held up to abuse and wore it well. The leather books were thicker, bound in brown or burgundy calf or black goatskin with a circular inset of marbled paper with matching endpapers and hand-sewn headbands. Each year we made a few cord-bound books, beautifully elaborate and time-consuming masterpieces of the craft. But best of all, and simplest: the books laid flat. The spine was sewn and hinged properly, and when you opened the book flat on a table it stayed that way, open and easy to use.

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That was the principle, let people make their own books. At a very basic level, it proposes a completely onanistic model of production and distribution: write a book yourself, for yourself. In a way you could say that's a utopian, and somewhat naive ideal. It does seem outdated, the idea of spending an afternoon writing in a journal. It is a kind of narcissism, a completely pointless, useless kind of production, bound in a durable volume that will outlast its author. It's a pre-internet narcissism, though—one that is properly narcissistic, without a supposed audience or correspondents, without any prospect of communication or response. Something about it is actually perverse, then: a book for an audience of one. A blank book is an anti-book. And it is this aspect that I actually find most interesting, the idea of producing a book not as a form of distribution or communication, but as an object.

At this point, it's hard to justify printing a book as an efficient vehicle of communication, particularly if your subject is something with such a small and diffuse audience as art. The distribution is impossible—all those little bookshops, even if they still existed, could never stock or even find the books that might be interesting to their audience. Just the costs of printing a book alone are so prohibitive as to severely curtail much of the interesting things that could be published. Self-publishing is no better, unless you're the kind of writer who wants to spend a majority of their time on the phone

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trying to get your book into stores. The short-lived zine revolution just seems to have confirmed the futility of trying to be a writer, publisher, and distributor simultaneously.

I help run a bookshop, Section 7 Books in Paris, (to be precise, my role is mostly building shelves, furniture, and display racks) but I don't have many illusions about the bookshop as a place for discussion or debate, as a public space. It is a curated space, carefully directed and constructed, a small and precise collection of objects. It really is closer in spirit and in function to a commercial art gallery: the books we carry are for a tiny, sophisticated public with extra money to spend on rare, beautifully-crafted objects. I remember the last years before my father sold the Watermark and went into real estate—first there was Barnes and Noble, and a few years later there was Amazon.com. It was a bloodbath, a dark time for all those little bookshops we had sold to, which were shutting their doors one after the other. What would become of all the little bookshops? For all of us it was pretty inconceivable. But now that the dust has settled it seems clear, and maybe not such a tragedy after all: the little bookshops will become little galleries.

Maybe more than the bookshop, the closed form of a book itself seems more and more like a peculiar artifact. Not entirely useless, but a static thing, no longer the appropriate form for discourse, argument, reaction, conversation. Often sadly dated by the time it is published. A book is a linear construction, an uninterrupted

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transmission from an author to a reader, and its authority is embodied in the form, one page after another. You literally can't talk when you're reading a book. You can't talk back to a book, like you can to a blog. Even the conversations that take place around books are now easier to find and more energetic and wide-ranging online than at a local bookshop. Now we can say that books are dead, but "dead" in the way that painting is dead: as a form without any real relevance or legitimacy beyond the scope of its own internal problems. The kind of death that is just reenacted with the publication of every new book.

That isn't to say that the implications of our new way of reading haven't been explored in book form. *The Sluts*, by Dennis Cooper, could be called a novel in chat room form, with a multitude of—I wouldn't necessarily even call them "characters," more like voices or better yet "posts." The posts assume and discard identities as quickly as they're formed, speaking in tongues, speaking in fiction, dissolving and reforming. The authenticity of *The Sluts* is probably attributable at least in part to the fact that Cooper has for several years now hosted a blog, DC's. It's a place with thousands of readers and maybe a hundred or so distinguished locals, as Cooper calls them, readers who stop in the comments section to talk about books, sex, their health problems, their novels, music, drugs. Probably there is a whole genre of literature and bookmaking that can grow into this space between the book form

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and the de-spatialized intimacy of the internet. But then again, probably it could be all published online anyway. Recently my experience of buying books is mostly one of disappointment: some of this is interesting, or useful, but why make it into a book? You are probably wondering the same thing as you read this.

But I was raised making books. It's all I know. That is to say, what still interests me about books now is not reading, or even writing, though I have recently written a novel myself, but making books. It's a building process: picking a paper, figuring out the mechanics of the cover, the printing, the binding. And of course the writing, but to be honest I consider that a kind of construction process too, constructing a kind of space inside the book, the time it takes to read something, constructing an experience of reading something by turning through the pages. I rewrite as much as I write, copying and quoting, editing and collaging pieces of text together, assembling something out of fragments, recycling. The craft of writing does not interest me. I consider the process of making a book—even writing it—like making a sculpture: I consider how it can or can't be used, how it relates to an idea of function, what it looks like and how it feels, most of all how it gets built. And above all, making a book (like making a sculpture) is always a way of answering the question of why to make a book. Reanimating the corpse.

When I worked in the bookbindery there were a few volumes of poetry left over from the early days

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when my parents bound the occasional vanity project. Letterpress poems printed on ochre paper with calligraphic title pages, bound in slim hand-tooled leather covers with the author's name stamped in gold along the spine. The poems weren't much good, from what I remember, and maybe that's what made them such poignant objects. The fact that so much care and attention had gone into creating a specific form, a unique vehicle for the words. This was a kind of ideal book, a book out of circulation, a useless object like a painting is useless. Painting started to get really interesting at about the time photography came along: when it was finally stripped of the last shreds of function, of any possibility of serving a public purpose, of communicating anything. Then it finally had to stand on its own, autonomous and abject, just a thing. Those volumes of poetry, unread and beautiful, flagrantly, offensively useless, narcissistic and perverse, onanistic, queer—that's what a book wants to be. Autonomous and indifferent, an abstract book.

I finished writing my own novel, *Leave Me Be*, a few months ago. It was a couple of years in the making, a slow and intermittent process of rewriting and editing, actually a long and frustrating process. In that respect, completely different from building a sculpture, in which most of the decisions can be made quickly, deliberately. A book is a long and complex thing, and when you change a part of it you have to go back through and

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rewrite the entire thing. At least that was true in my case. Throughout the course of writing the book, I was thinking about how it would be published. I discussed the project with a small publisher, and considered which among the other small niche publishing houses might be interested in a fragmented, lewd, illustrated book of experimental fiction by an unknown author. But by the time I had finished the book it was clear that I should make the book myself. The book is a story of disappearance, told through the fucked-up voice of a drugged-out, misanthropic narrator, someone looking for a kind of self-annihilation who finally wanders off into the forest and finds it. There was something innate to the content of the story itself that resisted publication—it was a story I wanted to write, but not necessarily something I wanted other people to read. It was a deliberate attempt to construct a kind of invisibility, and the form of the book had to reflect that logic. The book itself needed to be invisible. Working with a publisher, getting the book into bookstores, that was out of the question.

At the same time I had been assembling a collection of *Dwelling Portably*, a survivalist message bulletin published out of the Oregon woods since 1981. The editors of *Dwelling Portably*, Burt and Holly Davis, have been living a nomadic lifestyle, building temporary shelters on public land, living on about \$300 per person per year, and communicating only via a post office box for over thirty years. The zine itself is a direct

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manifestation of their project. Each issue is assembled mostly from edited letters they receive from their correspondents on a variety of topics—building a tent; evading police; sources for cheap food—and is usually supplemented by a report on an experiment they've recently carried out. How to make shoes from a bicycle tire, for instance. It is written on a manual typewriter, reduced on a photocopy machine to a miniscule 6 point font, and reproduced as an 8- or 16-page pamphlet that can be sent through the mail three or four times per year to maybe 500 subscribers. The print is almost too small to read, but it keeps their costs low and it keeps each issue light and portable enough to carry with you wherever it is you're going. Each issue costs a dollar, and whatever Burt and Holly make from the sales of *Dwelling Portably* makes up for the majority of their income. As a book, it is utterly convincing in the way that an Ad Reinhardt painting is convincing: you have the sense that nothing is superfluous, and nothing could possibly be added. It is a book in its purest, absolute form.

My collection was nearly complete (although Burt explained to me that not all issues were available, some having been misplaced in now-forgotten underground storage bins buried in the Oregon woods), and I wanted to make a book out of the collection. I discussed the idea with Burt and Holly, and though they didn't object to the idea they insisted that any collection of their work should be edited for redundancy and reduced as much

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as possible to keep the book as lightweight and portable as possible. For some time I thought about editing or reworking the material myself somehow—turning it into a work of art. But finally I just went ahead and printed it, all of it. I understood their priorities, but it was something I had to see, this thick tome of a book, a bible, bound in black goatskin. It becomes funereal, finite, a kind of austere memorial to a hardcore lifestyle, somehow impenetrable—*Dwelling Portably*, taken out of circulation.

And of course *Leave Me Be* is the companion volume, thin and light, bound in a special alum-tanned white goatskin from Nigeria. The title is debossed into the leather without gold foil, just a ghostly hot stamp. The first one I made myself, but I only have some rudimentary tools and no shop to work in, and besides I haven't bound a book in about fifteen years. I wanted to make ten of each, *Dwelling Portably* and *Leave Me Be*, so I visited a bindery here in Paris. It's a busy little shop run by an old couple. She does the sewing on a wooden frame, and he cases in. Most of the books are corporate annual reports, though they clearly have a steady flow of restoration work as well, rebinding old bibles and fine editions. He smokes pungent Habanitos, which have stained the walls yellowish cream. The first time I visited, they told me no, but when I went back a second time they relented. The binding wasn't particularly complicated, although there were a few double-sized pages that had to be folded English and tipped in, and I brought my own end papers,

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cut from topological maps. I pushed for a soft binding, and we compromised on a thin board, which makes the books both look and feel something like bibles. We were on a tight deadline, so when he had the books sewn he called me and asked me to deliver the cut skins to another shop across town to do the paring. When you make a leather book, the edges of the leather need to be pared down to the thickness of paper so they can fold smoothly around the edge of the board and lay flat under the endpapers. It takes an extremely sharp curved blade and a sure hand—something I can manage when I need to, though I am no expert. But I had discovered a whole network of craftsmen, and each small facet of the process could be contracted out to a specialist. This man was a paring specialist. I thought that was pretty amazing. After the paring was finished, I took them back to my binder to finish up the cases. When I went back to pick them up I saw that he had hand-tooled a thin line around the edges of the covers, though I didn't ask him to; I think they look great.

July 2009

Oscar Tuzon (1975, Seattle) is an artist living in Paris and a founding member of castillo/corrales. In addition to his work in sculpture and installation, Tuzon has published several books: a monograph about his work (*I Can't See*, 2010) and three limited edition artist books: *Leave Me Be; Dwelling Portably;* and a handbound reprint of *FOYU*.

This 16-page, saddle-stitched signature is the first installment of *The Social Life of the Book* – a quarterly, subscription-based series of original texts by writers, artists, publishers, designers, booksellers, etc. – reflecting on reading, designing, publishing, and distributing books, today.

Next installment:
Moyra Davey, "The Wet and the Dry"

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