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The Imperishable Perishable Press

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The Imperishable Perishable Press

BY TERRANCE KEENAN

It has been a good deal more than a century since hand-printed, hand-crafted books became the specialist's domain, to be sought after by the knowing and handled with delectation. The concept of text, paper, and print all having some aesthetic unity is one that the average modern reader has not been educated to appreciate. Fortunately, however, there have been bookmakers and designers—William Morris or Bruce Rogers, for example—who have managed to keep the notion alive for the interested few. But today, in the face of paper costs, high-speed printing, and the massive publishing industries, the individual craftsman is easily overwhelmed. Unless he has a will and a voice for hawking his skills, he will not survive.

Walter Hamady, Professor of Art at the University of Wisconsin and the founder of the Perishable Press, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, is a noisy, determined, but also consummate, craftsman. The George Arnts Research Library holds better than half of the more than one hundred books that the Perishable Press has produced in the last twenty years. At the time that these volumes were acquired, the Library was not actively collecting fine printed materials, but instead, specific authors of the 1960s and 1970s—Toby Olson, Joel Oppenheimer, and Diane Wakoski, among others—who, as it happened, were being published by the Perishable Press. Syracuse is doubly fortunate in obtaining these books since many of the Perishable editions were very small: one hundred copies or less, many of which were dispersed to authors or friends—a feature which accounts for their severely limited availability.

The Hamady colophon is a trademark of the Press. Normally, one expects to find only print and publishing information in the colophon and the colophon itself on the last printed page. In a Hamady book the colophon may appear first, or in varying places near the beginning or near the end. The original and frequently unconventional formatting of the books determines the final positioning; but



Dear reader, the pieces in this book were written over 1969-1970 mostly as a result of telling my wifestories about the good life with my grandfather.

The book is limited to 98 copies & all have been taken by subscription. This new type-face is Sabon Antiqua designed by Jan Tschichold, Hon. R.D.L., who is old friends with Elizabeth Kner, the bookbinder who with her assistant, Birutė A. Eulora, has given a housing to these sheets. The exquisite marbled papers were made specially for this book by our friend Norina Rubovits on paper made in our basement on new water-marked moulds (W&M) hand-made by Edwin Amies & Son in Maidstone, Kent. The title-page drawing is by Jack Beal whose work we love very much. The press-mark floating above was just sent by Sulayman Alamuddin from Beirut. My wife cheerfully distributed the type and read the proofs. In short, this book has been made by friends.

W5H-Mt H-Good Friday 1971

Colophon page from Walter Hamady's *These Chairs* (Perishable Press, 1971). Text in black on textured gray paper with white medallion and yellow rule.

sometimes, it is sheer whimsy. The information divulged is never dull. The type, papers, binding, and press run are described, of course, but so are the circumstances of the making of the book, the weather, and even the mood in the printing shop. These details draw the reader into the core and spirit of the book. They alert him that the book he is handling is itself a work of art.

Some sample excerpts of Hamady colophons from the George Ar-ents Research Library follow:

. . . The type is hand set Palatino printed on Shadwell papers made in the basement. The folding and sewing, the wrapping & shipping were done upstairs within sight of Blue Mounds before, during & on Sadie Hawkins Day . . . (W. S. Merwin, *Chinese Figures*, second series, 1971)

Published between the full Sturgeon moon & the Perseid meteor showers at Minor Confluence in Driftless Wisconsin. . . . (Harry Mark Petrakis, "Chapter Seven", from *The Hour of the Bell*, 1976)

Work on this book began back in February & here it is the middle of July on the Full Buck Moon & its penumbral eclipse. all [sic] of these various Japanese text papers were used because 1) we were not in production of our own *Shadwell* at starting time & 2) it was very difficult to get *any* good hand-made in quantity . . . (Jerome Rothenberg, *A Poem of Beavers*, 1973)

In Sight of Blue Mounds is so-entitled because our life is lived in such close interaction to these outliers within the driftless area of s.w. Wisconsin. The book serves several functions: . . . [among which are] to use up all the different papers that came from trying to reduce our supply of old towels, ties, jeans, sheets & shirts—so you could say our friends have slept on & worn this book. . . . (Walter Hamady, *In Sight of Blue Mounds*, 1972)

Hamady's views on the making of books and paper form a special philosophy that can be appreciated by anyone who loves books. The advice he gives is not, perhaps, entirely practical for the business-

man; but if practicality had been his major concern, then none of these books would have come into existence. In all he says on the subject there shines a wonderful ethical sense. In the introduction to his retrospective catalogue *Two Decades of Hamady and the Perishable Press Limited* (1984), Hamady expounds:

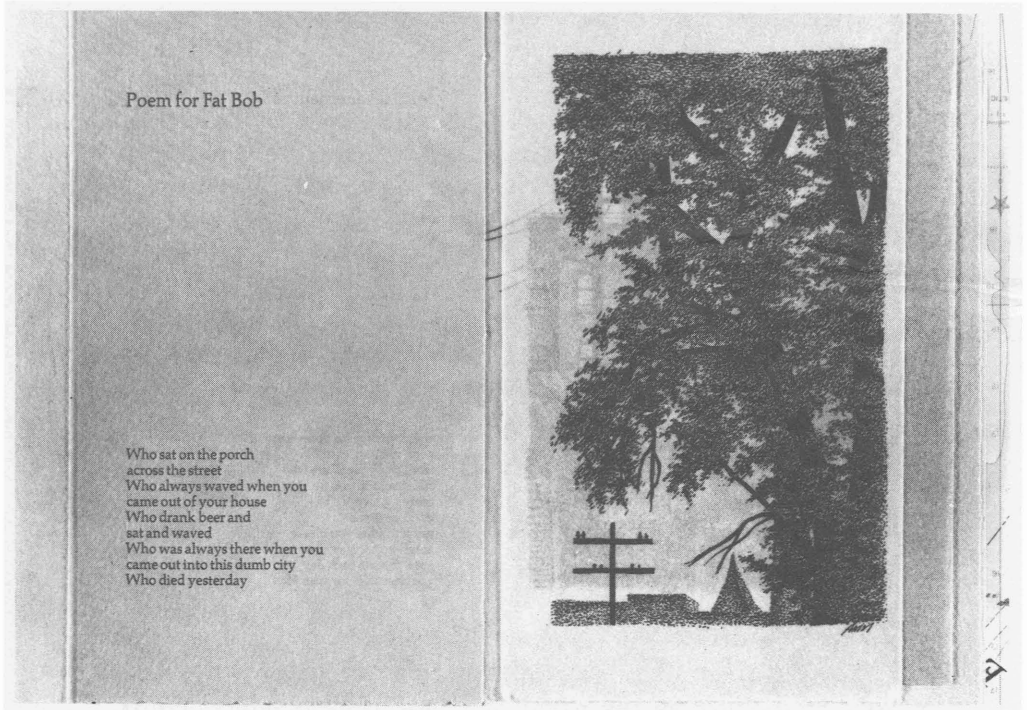
. . . the book is perhaps the most personal form an artist can deal with. It encompasses a multiple and sequential picture plane, it is tactile, and to be understood it must be handled by the viewer, who then becomes a participant. The participant is an individual, not public by display but private by means of one-person-at-a-time revelation. . . .

The book is *not* something that needs to be described for the catalogue in thirty-eight words or less! It is a living dynamic possibility—a meeting place for whole worlds of divergent elements of human expression to melt and flow, to meld into excess beyond the limits of its parts. It is not merely bound pages to be sold and shelved and checked out.

To understand the structure of [a] book, one must understand seeing, that is, know how to *see*. The book is a drawing in that it is organizing shapes in space, shapes with space, space and elements, such as line/texture/color/harmony/balance, and so on. But the book is sculpture too; physically it must be held and manipulated by the viewer—but the viewer remains controlled by the intent of the artist. The artist reveals to the viewer as the gourmet chef reveals courses in color/texture/flavor complements—with true elegance, that is, completely free from awkwardness. . . .

Still people ask, why make your own paper, why make paper by hand? Well, why make spaghetti sauce from scratch and cook your pasta al dente instead of grabbing it out of a can ready to go? Why grind your own grains and bake your own bread when there are bakeries everywhere?

The answer, simply, is because *it is better!* This assumes a few things, such as that you are a damn good cook, that you are thoroughly experienced in tasting every kind of bread made on the planet, that you *love* to consume the most simple/complex paradoxes of the world, that you have a gift, or knack, and that you have the ability to *see* clearly with body



Poem for Fat Bob

Who sat on the porch
across the street
Who always waved when you
came out of your house
Who drank beer and
sat and waved
Who was always there when you
came out into this dumb city
Who died yesterday

Poem by Ken Mikolowski; illustration by Ann Mikolowski in *Thank You Call Again* by Ken Mikolowski (Perishable Press, 1973). Photograph shows the various text papers and the map used as a wrapper.

and mind well enough to provide/perform the necessary aesthetic craftsmanship. . . . A sheet of handmade paper has a wonderful sensual touch, and, as the oriental rug people say, it has a lot of *hand*, like the Bijar or the Daghestan, different and subtle.

Irregularity, unevenness, and uniqueness are qualities the machine is not interested in at all. A dented deckle. A folded-over corner. The out-of-square sides. That fortuitous red thread underlining a random word, that lace-wing insect preserved forever in the corner of the title page, that crater, the vatman's drops, the vatman's tears, a circle between title and text. The irregularity signifies: here, *humanity*, here is a sign that a human being did this! The eye and hand were here! . . .

Books begin with a text, then a typeface design that will be harmonious with the meaning of the text. Then the text is set in type and is printed on paper. So the paper really carries this configuration. What could be more basic? The flour to the dough. The rag to the pulp, the pulp to the sheet, the sheet to the page, the page to the book, the parts to the sequence, the sequence giving over the meaning.

None of this tells about the variety of Hamady products, the tip-ins, the embossings, nor the humor he employs for surprising effects. Particularly notable in this respect is the volume from whose wrapper pocket a silhouetted face emerges, as though drowning in the water-like swirls of marbled paper. Ken Mikolowski's book of poems called *Thank You Call Again* (1973) is another interesting publication. It is printed on five different types of paper that are sewn into survey maps (in our case a United States National Ocean Survey nautical chart), and it contains illustrations by Ann Mikolowski of particular finesse and beauty.

When art and meaning come together so effectively, when craft and purpose meld so well, something precious emerges. Of the many one-of-a-kind things in the world, few have a memorable identity. In the work of Walter Hamady the art of bookmaking explores new terrain. The finished product is not a candidate for the museum or the gallery. It holds something for the eye and the mind both, something that was created by human hands to be held by human hands. Often beautiful, always different and provocative, the books of the Perishable Press are durable reminders of the creative spirit at work and play—thriving against the odds.