

IMPACT7 keynote speaker preview

Johanna Drucker

The unabridged online chat with Robert Heather

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Johanna Drucker is the Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA, USA. She is internationally known for her work in the history of graphic design, typography, experimental poetry, fine art, and digital humanities. In addition, she has a reputation as a book artist, and her limited edition works are in special collections and libraries worldwide. Her most recent titles include *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Speculative Computing* (Chicago, 2009), and *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (Pearson, 2008). She is currently working on a database memoir, *ALL*, the online *Museum of Writing* in collaboration with University College London and King's College, and a letterpress project titled *Stochastic Poetics*.

Robert Heather is currently Manager, Collection Interpretation at the State Library of Victoria. In his previous role as Director of Artspace Mackay he established the Australian Artists' Books forum and the Libris Awards for Artists' Books. He is also the founder and administrator of Artist Books 3.0, an online forum for book artists.

In 2005 Robert attended Johanna Drucker's biennial course on collecting artists' books at the Rare Book School, University of Virginia. His questions to her on behalf of *IMPRINT* highlight some of the areas of artistic and scholarly activity that have engaged Prof. Drucker during her distinguished career.

RH In Australia you are probably best known for your writing on the subject of artists' books and contributions towards the discourse around that artform. However you have also published extensively on art theory, graphic design, experimental poetry and contemporary art. How would you describe your scholarly work?

JD My scholarly work began with an interest in the history of the alphabet and writing systems and a fascination with the many associations and powers ascribed to visual signs. My master's thesis on alphabet symbolism became the basis of *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination*. I had been involved with printing, poetry, writing, and books before I was in graduate school, so I also had a strong commitment to visual poetry and poetics. Trying to demonstrate that visual forms enter into the production of meaning in poetic expression has occupied a good deal of my critical and scholarly attention. *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art Practice* was the outgrowth of my doctoral dissertation. But all of this work has autobiographical subtexts, naturally. In the world of poets of which I was a part in the 1970s, visual poetry and typographic experiment were seen as marginal, or even frivolous. The California language poets were particularly hostile to graphical features. But I was working in a print shop where we were doing literary publishing of contemporary poetry. I was exposed to wonderful experimental work across a wide range of conceptual, formal, procedural traditions. I was motivated to make an argument for the visual contribution to semantic value—to show not only *that* typography mattered, but *how* compositional elements created meaning in verbal work.

My interest in visual forms and formats continues. True, I took a detour (fourteen years!) into teaching contemporary art history, and focused on visual traditions in the mainstreams of modern and contemporary art, and published in that field as well. I think one of the benefits I have had as

a scholar has been that by changing venues and disciplinary departments – from art history to literature, media studies, digital humanities, and information studies—I have had to absorb a broader range of critical approaches and knowledge of specific fields than people whose careers are more traditional. For example, though scholars in bibliography track the foundations of that field from the 20th century scholars recovering Shakespeare’s authentic texts through forensic and analytic methods, and see themselves within various traditions associated with the major figures in their field, like Fredson Bowers or Thomas Tanselle, almost none of them know the history of graphic design and its approach to the study of books. I cannot imagine how one engages in the study of a book without some knowledge of Jan Tschichold or Ladislav Sutnar and K. Lönberg-Holm. By the same token, to discuss a photographic artist’s book without knowing something about this history of photographic publication in albums and books since the beginning of that art’s existence seems ignorant to me. But these worlds—bibliography, graphic design, art history, and literary history, remain very separate. They are distinct from media history, film, music, and theatre in many cases as well.

At present, my scholarship has circled back to the alphabet and to theories of writing and inscription, but I am also focused on questions of format—diagrammatic writing—and the design of environments and visualisations that suit humanistic concerns. I’m in an Information Studies department now, and actively involved in the creation of Digital Humanities as a curriculum and course of study. This is a generative and open-ended environment in which to synthesise, though I do miss the attention to close reading of aesthetic works that has been so much part of my writing over the years. I may go back to it, of course, but just now I’m really focused on the historiography of writing again. The number of projects that beg to be done will always outstrip time and energy. Just last week I had an exchange with a visual poet/anthologist about how important it would be to do a comprehensive exhibit on visual poetry, or what I call the ‘invisible’ tradition. That history is still so misunderstood, under-documented, and little appreciated that each generation seems to reinvent some of the same moves anew (collage, over-written calligraphy, cut-ups etc.).

Academic departments and publishers are still discipline based. Hiring and promotion still follow the needs of basic teaching assignments and staffing. Art historians do not consider graphic design history a valid field because it is so clearly associated with commercial activity (as if the fine arts were not!). And literary scholars (fewer and fewer of them exist in any case as English departments are split between service learning in basic writing courses and cultural studies activities that care little for aesthetic objects or traditions) are often ignorant of production processes or design techniques. Artists tend to be more synthetic than scholars, even if they are often self-taught or outside received traditions of critical thought.

RH In your publication *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995 & 2004) you referred to artists' books as having been 'the quintessential 20th century artform'. What did you mean by that? Now we are well into the 21st century, are artists' books still as relevant and what do you see as their future?

JD The 20th century began with favourable conditions for artists’ involvement in books: the availability of means of production across a full spectrum from office machines to high-end digital output, with letterpress, printing media of all kinds—photography, photo-offset, xerography, and other methods—having each provided different tools and aesthetic possibilities. What other era combined this set of opportunities with a disposition to engage with print-based media? Though books have shifted from their central place in earlier communications ecologies, and even in the 20th century had competition from film, radio, and television, to add to the competition of earlier times in the form of newspapers, theatre, public spectacles, they still maintain a cultural authority and iconic value.

In our era, I worry that the book will become a mere fetish object and its fundamental utility and the exigencies that places on design principles will begin to evaporate. I hate to see artists' books become boutique objects that only serve a marginal purpose. The place of artists' books is still so unclear. I teach a course on artists' books collections development in Rare Book School, and know that the curators who have really good, informed, intuitions and experience make terrific collections. The librarians I work with UCLA are all like that—each has a distinct collection, rationale, and understanding of the audience and use, whether building a research, teaching, or public outreach aspect. But do these books enter into larger conversations with literary or art worlds? Do they have any influence? A lot of artists' books are still, sadly, over-produced works meant only for special collections, and that seems utterly inadequate to me. How are they part of the life of our times? Think about the impact of graphic novels. Can any book artist claim to have had as much attention as Chris Ware?

My hope is that the multi-platform repurposable content approach to production will provoke artists to make widely available versions of their projects. Everyone who knows me knows my least favourite artists books are the over-produced, under-conceptualised cute game-toy-table-top-sculptural objects that may look good in a case, but are one-liners and without any intellectual substance. Many very fine books are rare and expensive and have to be because of the amount of production work. So my objection is not to expensive books, but to overproduced books whose cost is only an effect of production values.

The biggest challenge, still, is to create a system of critical review in which works are discussed with the same kind of competition for attention as visual art works or literary ones. Mistakes are still made, opinions about what is good or not, interesting or without value, are always subjective, and even collective judgment may be flawed, but the utter absence of this mediating system of critical assessment continues to plague artists' books. I feel like most of these objects—my own included—are like convent raised virgins offered to rich collectors with a guarantee of their pedigree, who then vanish into the same cloistered environments from which they were spawned, trapped in a world in which they are forever shut from view except for those moments of public display in which they are exhibited as trophies of a well-funded collector.

RH You have also been extensively involved in the Artists Books Online project (<http://www.artistsbooksonline.org>) compiling and cataloging an enormous range and variety of artists' books. What have been the outcomes of that project?

JD I enjoyed making ABsOnline because it taught me the fundamentals of digital humanities production, in particular, the benefits of structured data, metadata, and XML. I made the site in part to make my own books accessible, well aware that they have vanished from view into those same special collections I was referencing above. The Web makes it possible to make these works available again to anyone who wants to see them and study them. I can't say there has been an overwhelming outpouring of interest in my books, but I do know that the pedagogical objective of ABsOnline, which was to push the critical analysis of books by provided a descriptive vocabulary specific to book works, has at least had some benefit to the teaching community. I was, however, disappointed by how few people wanted to work on that project or contribute to it. We offered to scan, describe, host content by other artists, and met with all kinds of amazing responses. Some artists wanted to be paid for us to make their work available! I was doing all this work in top of my own full time job, my own books, scholarly work, etc., and people would act as if I had a staff and was getting a salary. The misunderstandings about academic life are rampant. But so are misconceptions about the amount of work involved in producing materials digitally. The amount of time and energy involved in the creation of infrastructure is enormous, but it disappears when the site works well. Still, sometimes just getting paragraphs out of artists about the

production history or basic conceptual foundation of a project proved difficult. I opted to stop at 300 objects, I think that is about what is there, because I ran out of funds to pay the student interns and also, I got tired of cataloguing books I already knew. I put the proof of concept out there—that if you have descriptive metadata scheme for cataloguing a book work, it can require attention to features of the book, lead someone through those features, ask that they pay attention to them. Has this had any impact on the field? I don't know.

I moved the project to UCLA—which is to say, my very kind IT people helped me set up a virtual environment to keep it on life support. The project was created in a Java-based environment and now lives on a LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP) environment. The technicalities of digital projects are not trivial, of course, and many people naively believe that digital copies are archival. Nothing could be further from the truth. Digital media are highly unstable, liable to mutation, open to corruption, and require enormous efforts and costs to be sustained.

RH In the 2005 article 'Critical issues/Exemplary works' in *The Bonefolder* e-journal (<http://www.philobiblon.com/bonefolder/BonefolderVol1No2.pdf>) you stated that 'because the field of artists' books suffers from being under-theorized, under-historicized, under-studied and under-discussed, it isn't taken very seriously'. Would you say that is still the case today?

JD Yes, though certainly College Book Art Association and the revived *Journal of Artists' Books* have helped broaden the interest base and number of people writing. The insularity of the field can only be countered by knowing more about our own traditions (history of books, artists, techniques, works, presses, people) and the current trends in art, literature, and design. Bad typography abounds. Naïve personal writing is rampant. An amateurism prevails in many cases. But of course, that is true in many fields, it is just that those systems (literary publishing or art curation) weed out the amateurs. Mark Dimunation once said, accurately and cuttingly, that he was amazed at the number of people who came to him with a work of book art after having taken one weekend workshop and expected him to buy it for the Library of Congress. Having a venue in a mainstream journal in which book arts were in dialogue with the other arts would be a significant shift. But are there enough artists' books that merit this kind of discussion? I know only a handful. But maybe that is enough. Certainly the 'great' works of the artists' book world still deserve more critical attention than they have gotten, but not in the form of puff pieces and celebratory catalogue essays, but as works of art whose critical premise can be shown to have something to say to other arts and artists, as well as publics.

RH Apart from your writings you are also a book artist in your own right. How do you describe your own artistic practice and how does it relate to your writings on the subject?

JD I came to books as a writer and with training in the visual arts. My first book, *Dark*, printed in 1972, used stone lithography and handset type set around the graphic vignettes in unjustified lines. That was the technology I had available, and I did the work myself, needless to say. I've done the production work on most of my books, except for collaborations with Brad Freeman, one or two books published by others (Granary, *The Figures*, *Cuneiform*), and help from Nora Ligorano on the binding of *Narratology*. Because I change the writing to fit the page and am interested in the way a book emerges in and through production, this is essential.

I always begin with a conceptual notion, a graphical form that emerges to suit it, and a sense of what the literary context for the project is. This is in part because I have been actively involved with poets and writers. Every book project is distinct, but the main themes of my work have been consistent: the forms of language and graphical expression, the tension between poetic language

and other linguistic forms, the news as an act of language, and women's stories encoded in narrative forms. That may seem like a lot of different things, but what it leaves out, for instance, is any 'personal' expression. I've always been more interested in constituting subjectivity as a place *from which* work is produced than as the topic of my writing. I'm working on a letterpress project now titled *Stochastic Poetics*, a letterpress work in which not a single line conforms to the conventions of quadrature that are the basis of lead type technology. The book supports a spatialised field of language within which poetic form arises—even as it draws on impressions of a quintessential Los Angeles event, an evening spectacle, where poets vied with street scenes and activities in an effort to be heard. Poetry in our times is that struggle, as is art, to make a space within the overwhelming scenes of mass and contemporary culture that allows alternative thought, perception, the turning of experience into form so that we can have experience, take it back from the monoculture. I know that is a romantic notion, but I am steeped in the Romantic tradition and belief in the power and purpose of imagination.

On another level, I am, unapologetically, an esoteric artist. I make small editions of rarified work for an even more rarified audience, I suppose. I've never imagined my work would have a popular following, not in the forms it takes. My language is too complicated, my thinking as well, and so I make what I believe in and feel grateful I have had as much success as I have. That is modest enough. I make editions of about fifty copies, maximum, give about half of them to friends, other artists, poets, and the other half of the edition goes to collectors and collections. I am guilty of the exact convent to cloister process I criticise above, you see! I've always written other things as well—scholarly, critical, and creative—and still have hopes that some of that work will eventually broaden my audience, or let me publish and write for a wider public. I have ideas for books that would be illustrated commentary on or observation of the current scene, the dark human comedy that would be publishable in a non-limited manner.

RH In Australia the artists' books community is predominantly intertwined with the practice of printmaking. Is that the case currently in the United States?

JD That is a hard question to answer. We have several major kinds of activity here. There are the fine presses, with their literary classics, contemporary artists, and limited editions. That is a literary tradition, and the printing, though often print-makerly, comes more from the tradition of humanist book design. We do have the printmaking shops associated with the art world, from which large scale editions, in the *livre d'artiste* mode, are launched. The 'zine world has morphed largely into the graphic novel world, and graphic novels are far from printmaking, but have had a huge impact. The schools with the MFA programs are, as you suggest is the case in your context, more likely to have come out of printmaking departments than any other. The photography community has a longstanding interest in books, albums, and publishing, and I think the digital photography scene has been very quick to move into print-on-demand for the benefits of image production. The difficulty as I see it is that most of the school programs, especially at the MFA level, still lack a solid historical and critical perspective on what a book is, what the traditions of literary, artistic, illustrated, photographic, alternative, and fine press are and have been. The idea of drawing books out of a printmaking program is a bit like thinking film can arise from painting or static photography. The sequential, developmental, symphonic intertextual play within the codex structure has a specific set of requirements and constraints that articulate a very different field of meaning production than a flat image can. That specificity only comes into focus by studying books as systems of intertextual production. That seems obvious, but is still hardly the common currency of discussion or training. Or maybe it is, but for the most part, writing about books or public discussion, focuses on themes, topics, and materials, not formal systems of articulation that are spatial and temporal.

RH Over here we read a lot about the growth of interest in letterpress and book arts throughout America. Is there a genuine a book arts resurgence going on around the world? And if so, what do you think are the driving forces for this, and do you think it will last?

JD Letterpress equipment and materials are getting scarce, scooped up by artists, collectors, and entrepreneurs. The fetish for letterpress is great, and I'm all in favour of seeing this material preserved and used for future generations. The study of craft for its own sake is certainly not a bad thing, and love of vanishing media is better than disregard for its values. But the tendency to create a society of living anachronisms is always the risk. I don't want to be Bruce Rogers or John Henry Nash any more than I want to be William Blake. We have to engage in aesthetic that are appropriate to our time if we want our work to be relevant. Every pretentious poet I know wants their work in an overproduced fine press edition. Put a monkey in a tuxedo and it looks good.

But in all seriousness, the appreciation of hand-made work, skill of making in drawing, painting, binding, printing, will all continue to rise because the number of people with serious training in that area is more limited than it was in earlier generations. When we think about the skill of punchcutters! Do you imagine that there are more than a tiny handful of people alive today capable of cutting a six-point Bodoni italic so it has a consistent style, fit, and look? The skills of the lithographic industry in the 19th century, or of engravers and illustrators with academic training that was rock solid so they could draw anything, are all vanished arts. More profoundly, the integrative physical actions of hand work—the cognitive effect of tactile, manual, engagement with the world through the motions of the body—are vanishing. We joke about having a slow technology movement that matches the slow food one. The pleasures of the letterpress shop are in the camaraderie that arises, as well as in the handling of type, paper, the press. But most of all, they come from the repetitive physical actions in which an intellectual and artistic project is brought into being through embodied experience. That performs restorative action, it has a beneficial effect on the psyche, I think. You work, you zone out, and you process even as you are putting the letters into the stick or pulling sheets in the back and forth walk of the press run.

RH At the IMPACT7 conference you will be presenting your paper by Skype. Will we be seeing you over here in Australia sometime in the future—and what would it take to lure you for a visit down under?

Not much! I'd love to come. The difficulty is timing—finding an opportunity when I could make the trip and stay more than a day or so, which would have been crazy for all concerned (too expensive, too tiring, too wasteful). But if I could come for a longer stay, then I would have the chance to see what people are doing, see some collections, sense the atmosphere and land, culture and history of your part of the world. That would be great.