

Essaying the Pamphlet

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THREE

Essaying the pamphlet

Joanne Lee

The Pam Flett Press is an independent serial pamphlet publication essaying aspects of the everyday. These visual, verbal, audio works also reflect metacritically on the forms through which diverse ideas might be explored, the potential for thinking otherwise about familiar things, and the ways in which complexity and contradiction can be valued. The Press is a collaboration between Joanne Lee (words and images developed from ongoing artistic research) and Sheffield design collective Dust (design and print). Since it first appeared in 2011, four issues of the Press have been distributed (*Call yourself a bloody professional; Lord Biro and the writing on the wall; Gumming up the works; Vague terrain*) with content being finalized for the release of a further two (*I see faces; Witches Knickers*); four more are currently at the research stage. This chapter brings the Press's various interests and iterations into dialogue with the histories and more recent practices of the pamphlet and essay forms it employs. It is deliberately associative, as fragments prompt discussion of format, content and methodology, and concludes with a reflection on alternatives to the privatized, professionalized academic mainstream.

Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language described the pamphlet as 'A small book, properly a book sold unbound, and only stitched'.¹

UNBOUND

The Pam Flett Press, like its historical forebears, is unbound. In the first two editions, a few modest pages of cheap newsprint are simply folded in half, each with a concertina companion of footnotes on coloured paper operating as a kind of wrap. In the third, the printed publication is bound (in a bubble gum pink stock, finished with a silver spine evoking the wrapper in which sticks of gum were formerly sold) but the edition consists merely of the footnotes for an essay that has entirely dematerialized to become an audio track available online. In the fourth, some six discrete but interrelated written and photographic essays on different sized sheets are clipped together with stainless steel fasteners so they are easily disassembled to reveal a double-sided photographic / typographic poster, and an envelope containing a letter of sorts. Conceptually, the press is also unbound. Whilst it professes an attention to essaying everyday life, it wanders (purposively) from its topics, imagining and associating to create connections and prompt new directions, so, for example, what began as an essay on chewing gum becomes a disquisition on chewing over and processing ideas, and on getting creatively blocked as well as digressing into the aesthetic categorisations of lumps, heaps and piles, art's fascination with excremental matter, and the important role of the lowly earthworm in facilitating human civilisation, as discussed by Charles Darwin...

According to Joad Raymond's study *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* the term pamphlet appeared in English in the fifteenth century, having first occurred in Anglo-Latin in the fourteenth. He describes how the name was derived from *Pamphilus seu de Amore*, a popular twelfth-century amatory poem, and how, with the addition of a diminutive ending -et, it then came to signify any small book.²



LOVE

It's important that the pamphlet should have something of the amatory in its etymology. The first issue of the Press, *Call yourself a bloody professional*, recalled the classical myth in which the potter Butades' daughter traced the shadow cast by candlelight of her departing lover: taken as one of art's foundational stories, here love was said to be the inventor of drawing. Through the Press I wanted to think about what it means to pursue a project out of love, rather than professional necessity. In this regard the creative and critical potential of amateurism (given that the amateur is, of course, a lover) offered a way of reflecting on – and perhaps contesting – certain constraints of academic and artistic work. As is clear throughout Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: fragments*, to be a lover is to be highly critical, since in caring so deeply interpretations really matter.³ The amateur is able to be 'anti-environmental' as Marshall McLuhan termed it, looking askance at 'normal' practice and able to try alternatives because they don't have a professional pressure to succeed in their activity.⁴ There is also a potential in amateurism to do things somewhat differently because one is working outside the parameters of professional norms, as in Daniel Boorstin's contention that: 'An enamoured amateur need not be a genius to stay out of ruts he has never been trained in...'⁵ Frustrated by aspects of contemporary art practice and academic research culture, and yet always avowedly critical in my practice, I sought to define my own parameters such that I could pursue investigations according to the needs of the project. I determined to think for myself, using the figure of the amateur as an excuse to do as I please, to focus selfishly upon the things about which I care, and to build relationships with those whose work excited me. I formulated the Press as a way of bringing together the disparate ideas and images that excited or perturbed me, and took as a licence Boorstin's sense that the amateur might pursue a 'wonderful vagrancy into the unexpected'.⁶ The first issue's title is borrowed from a sleeve note on an album by Manchester post-punk band The Fall. On *Totale's Turns*, Roman Totale XVIII (one of cantankerous band leader Mark E. Smith's many fictional alter-egos) reports the band being abused, with the comment 'CALL YOURSELVES BLOODY PROFESSIONALS' typed out in capitals. That it gets followed up by the even more damning assertion, 'you'll never work again!' lead me to consider my own (negative) relationship to the idea of a 'career' and then to recuperate the term via writer Rob Young's description of Julian Cope (a musician of similar vintage to Smith) as 'careering off on any number of research paths and musical adventures', a mobility that seemed much more interesting than the steady pursuit of a well-constructed CV.⁷

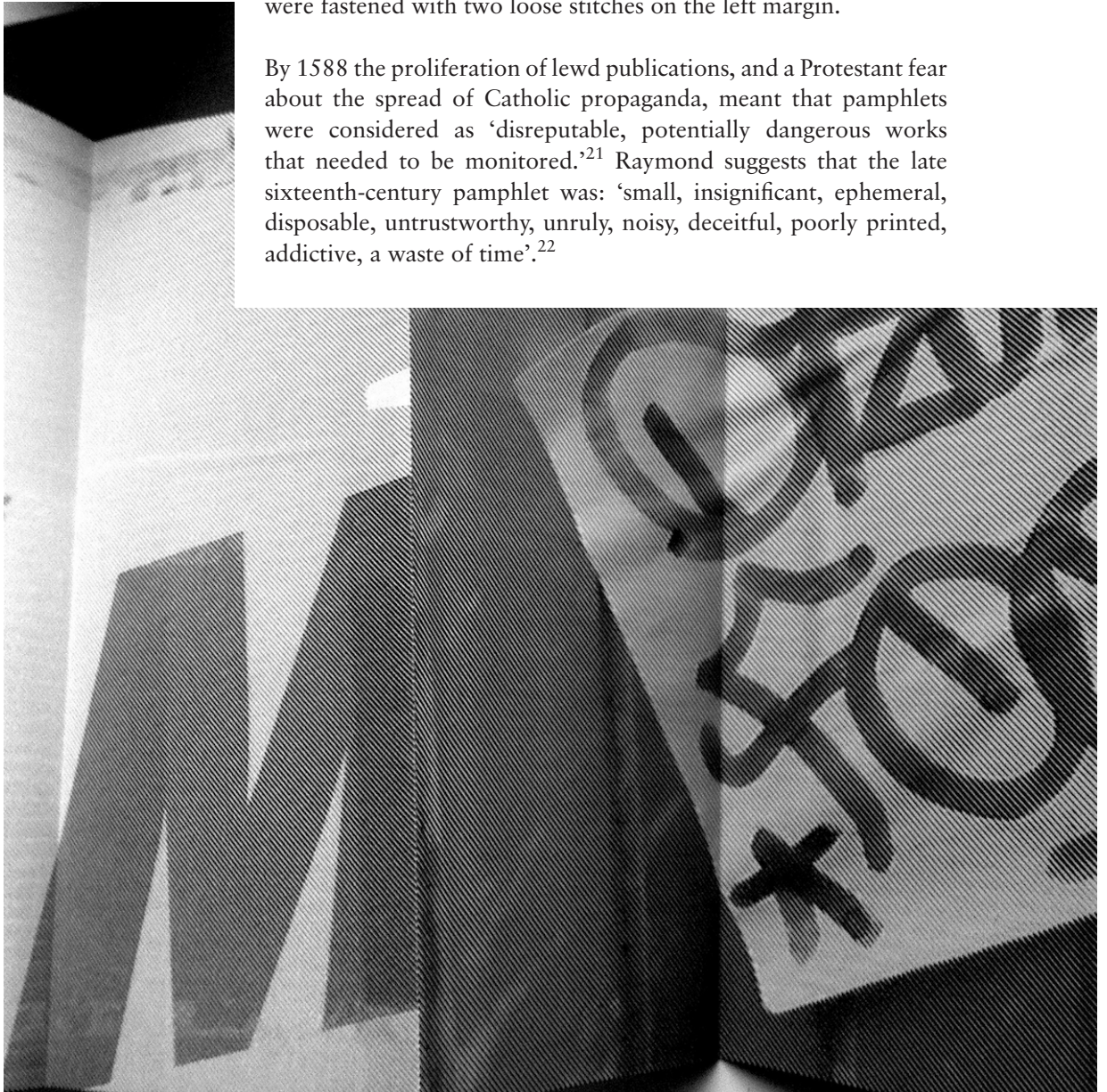


PLEASURE

The essay form that the Press puts to work is also concerned with pleasure. Theodor Adorno describes the essay's 'childlike freedom' to become excited by what others have already done and how it 'rejects the hostility to happiness of official thought' (168) which 'seals it off against anything new as well as against curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought' (169).⁹ He claims it develops epistemologically, as it manifests its own process of thought in the doing and that it is not concerned with first principles – 'It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about' – thus operating through connections via a form of associative logic.¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, meanwhile, writes of the essay: 'The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure: the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should wake refreshed, with its last'.¹¹ She writes that the essay 'must lap about us and draw its curtains across the world'.¹² Whilst an essay might well be the result of significant erudition or learning 'it must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture'.¹³ Brian Dillon's own address to the form notes that the essay is easily dismissed because of the transitory pleasure Woolf describes. He says the essay is disparaged too because 'the knowledge it contains has been too comprehensively integrated and smoothed'.¹⁴ I think here about the process of smoothing I noted in *Gumming up the works*, the Press's third edition: 'when it comes to what I think of as serious writing for my own agenda, then it's grindingly slow. I inch forward so that a paragraph is squeezed out over the course of several of days and then – across months or even years – is subsequently edited, re-edited, re-punctuated, the sentence structures re-worked incessantly. [...] My pace is limping and slow, so that the reader may (eventually, I hope) glide smoothly on'.¹⁵ But it's not, I think, that this smoothness is uncritical: rather, there's a powerful sense of caring sufficiently to craft very precisely what one wants to say and to do so in such a way that one's reader is seduced, and drawn imaginatively into a particular intellectual web. Dillon remarks how text derives from *textum*: a web, and thus the text potentially has a sort of power of attraction, holding all it captures 'in a delicate, murderous tension'.¹⁶ There's nothing weak about the web-like essay – we all know the strength of spider silk – whatever the appearance of lightness it gives. I'd say too that the slow generation of this web is a way in which as a writer and maker I can capture, structure and digest ideas: I think of the deliberate placement of various anchoring points, the relationship of radiating threads and spiral crossings, and the daily unmaking and remaking that many spiders pursue. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno has it: 'Properly written texts are like spiders' webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm. They draw into themselves all the creatures of the air. Metaphors flitting hastily through them become their nourishing prey. Subject matter comes winging towards them'.¹⁷

During the 1580s the word pamphlet came to refer to a short, vernacular work, in quarto format (a quarto being made from sheets folded twice), costing no more than a few pennies, a form that regularly featured on booksellers' stalls. Generally unbound, they were folded, collated and if more than a sheet in length, they were fastened with two loose stitches on the left margin.

By 1588 the proliferation of lewd publications, and a Protestant fear about the spread of Catholic propaganda, meant that pamphlets were considered as 'disreputable, potentially dangerous works that needed to be monitored.'²¹ Raymond suggests that the late sixteenth-century pamphlet was: 'small, insignificant, ephemeral, disposable, untrustworthy, unruly, noisy, deceitful, poorly printed, addictive, a waste of time'.²²



STITCHES

Threads recur, and not just in weaving – stitching too is a common image for thinking and writing. W. B. Yeats uses it to describe the writer's labour and its attempt to seem effortless: 'A line will take us hours maybe;/ Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,/ Our stitching and unstitching has been naught'.¹⁸ In Gertrude Stein's *How to write* she suggests too the writer ought to: 'Think in stitches'.¹⁹ Such a method is taken up literally in the idea of a 'back stitch methodology' named by artist-researcher Danica Maier and put to work in the *Returns* project out of which emerged the Press's fourth issue, *Vague terrain*.²⁰ In back stitch the needle remains pointing forwards but its tip is inserted first behind the thread's previous exit point, before emerging further ahead: it is thus a case of heading backwards in order to advance. One takes two steps forward and one back. In *Returns* (upon which I work with Maier and fellow artist-researchers Andrew Brown and Christine Stevens) we serially revisit the former Spode ceramics factory in Stoke on Trent. The project prompted my return to looking, thinking and writing I'd begun years earlier, and to the recollection of experiences of walking and photographing post-industrial 'terrains vagues' across several cities and decades. Back stitching to these different pasts drawn through the present pulled out and connected new research threads including a critical recognition of the states of in between-ness and conceptual terrain vague-ery at the heart of much contemporary artistic research. The Press's method then is to slow me down, sustaining investigations through the retracing of steps, and thus enabling the denser embroidering of ideas.

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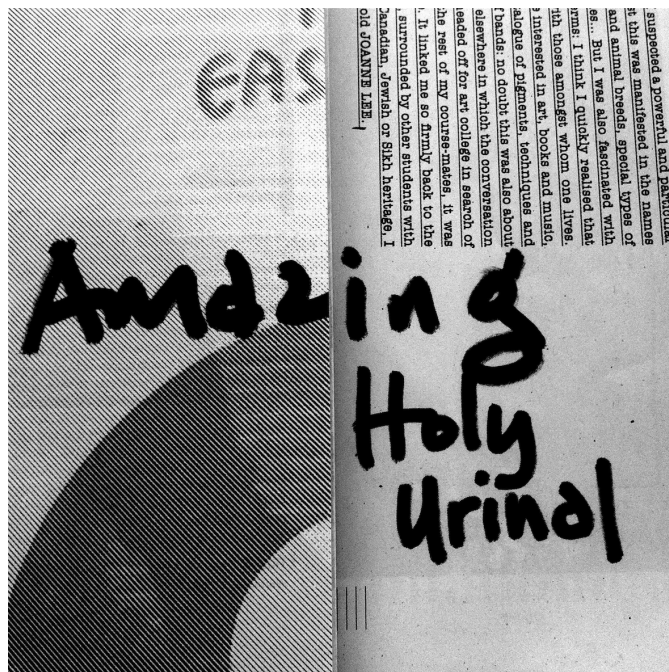
IMPROPER

That the pamphlet form has often been denigrated or looked upon with suspicion as to its quality or motive echoes the many issues I have with the impropriety of my own pamphleteering; indeed such was the degree of uncertainty that I found it necessary to confront the topic directly in a long footnote to *Gumming up the works*.²³ It begins with a *mea culpa* of sorts in which I set out the ways in which the work is improper: too personal, too autobiographical for academia, but too cluttered with footnotes and academic debate to find a place in a publisher's non-fiction lists; lacking in 'acceptable' academic methodology and tending to temporary critical alliances, chance encounters, and obsessive fandom; forgetting the bigger picture, and instead getting side-tracked in digressions and fixated upon all kinds of minutiae. Despite my academic role, with the Press I indulge the potential vanity of self-publishing rather than submitting to proper peer-review and editorial process. The things I write are too disparate, arising as they do out of particular friendships and communities and the conversations these engender: they don't add up to anything that might be described as a coherent body of work: I merely follow my curiosity and respond to interesting opportunities. However, of course, in reality matters are more complicated, and the slew of confession isn't quite the truth. I go on to articulate how the nuances of writing, design and imagery I require are hard to achieve within the usual constraints of peer-reviewed academic journals or books. What's more, the work is disparate because I have an omnivorous curiosity, and respond to ideas emerging from dialogue with creative and critical friends about contemporary cultural questions. The apparently chaotic or heterogeneous range of subjects becomes connected through the application of imagination and analysis. I attend to the details and minutiae too quickly passed over elsewhere, when those in search of grander statements miss the subtle textures of life as it is lived. I assert that the investigation is personal and embodied because I consider this to be a political stance in an increasingly institutional world. Its footnotes carefully attribute the ideas and works under discussion, to connect to and between other thinkers, but they also evoke the unfurling of ideas beyond the immediate text. I make clear too that despite my fears regarding methodology and lack of disciplinary training, I've an intense and sustained engagement with the ideas being explored: as a result I realize that the issue is not so much one of lack or inadequacy, but rather, of excess. Ultimately I conclude that 'proper' and 'improper' turn out to be designations external to the projects I pursue; the work carves out its own space, sets its own terms and makes its own form. The most rigorous approach I can take to the work is to listen closely to its demands and to find a means in which this can be best explored without narrowing or deforming its ideas. There is something here of Virginia Woolf's comment that: 'The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. [...] This proves that a book is alive: because it has not crushed anything I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip it in, without any compression or alteration'.²⁴

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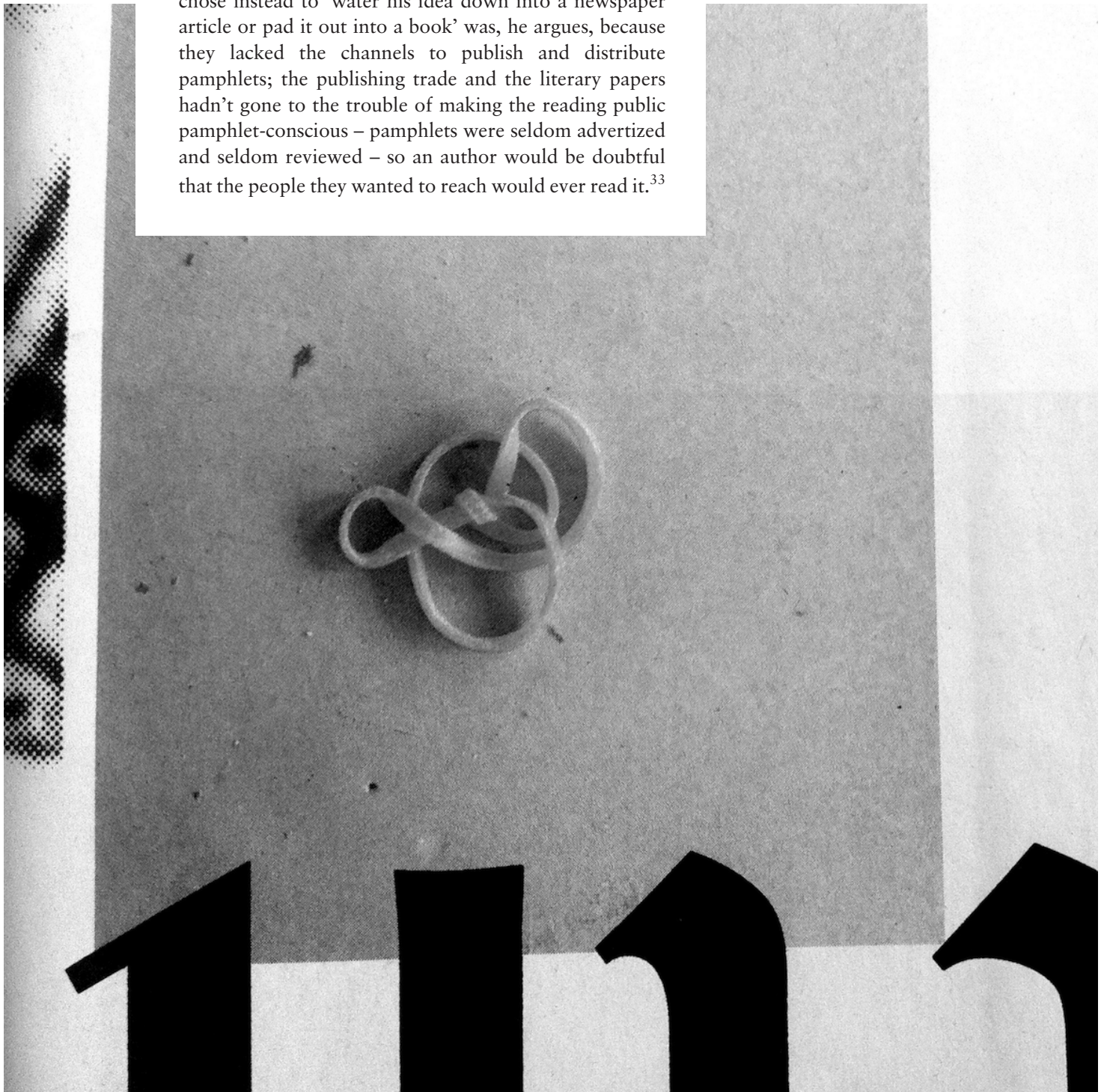
This negative view of the pamphlet is present too in George Orwell's article on *Pamphlet Literature*. Orwell notes an 'enormous revival' of pamphleteering 'since about 1935', yet he asserts that this renewal of the form had not produced anything of real value, and indeed that 'it is practically all trash, interesting only to bibliophiles'.²⁵ Classifying pamphlets of the era under nine headings (Pacifist, Anti-left and crypto-fascist, Conservative, Social Democrat, Communist, Trotskyist and Anarchist, Non-party radical, Religious, and Lunatic) he concludes that, 'they could finally be reduced to two main schools, roughly describable as Party Line and Astrology. There is totalitarian rubbish and paranoiac rubbish, but in each case it is rubbish'.²⁶ These publications are dubious or dull because they are, he says, 'written by lunatics who publish at their own expense, or belong to the subworld of the crank religions, or are issued by political parties'.²⁷



CONSTELLATION

As one of those very 'lunatics who publishes at their own expense' I'm well aware that without peer review and editorial oversight the Press could be just the sort of thing likely to fall into Orwell's derogatory classification of 'astrology'. In fact Orwell's criticism is particularly apposite since the Press's subject matter has involved a concern for the diverse ways in which humans seek to find meaning in the signs and wonders of the everyday world, from the propriety of academic research to the odder reaches of interpretation. And indeed I have been specifically addressing the reading into stellar patterns that produced the figures used as 'asterisms' (or constellations, as they are more popularly known) from which the astrological zodiac is drawn, along with more proper scientific designations of astronomy. In *I see faces*, I draw on Marina Warner's work in *Phantasmagoria*, which notes how different cultures have habitually seen the same salient zodiac patterns in random scatterings of stars, but have interpreted them in diverse ways, using distinct narratives and characters.²⁸ This issue of the Press focuses on the phenomenon of *pareidolia*, which is defined as being when meaning is found in random source material – faces in inanimate objects, animal shapes in clouds, the outline of familiar countries in marks on the wall – as a result of the human visual system's tendency to extract patterns from 'noise'. It does this in order to consider the various approaches to pattern recognition and interpretation by creative people, scientists, psychoanalysts, people with paranormal beliefs and those suffering psychotic episodes. Neuroscientist Peter Brugger has asserted that '[t]he ability to associate, and especially the tendency to prefer "remote" over "close" associations, is at the heart of creative, paranormal and delusional thinking'.²⁹ He notes that the readiness to see connections between unrelated objects or ideas is what 'most closely links psychosis to creativity'.³⁰ Whereas Orwell rightly criticizes 'paranoiac rubbish', I want to recognize the more positive potential of an 'excess' of meaning made possible by proliferating connections, such that the everyday can be interpreted in stranger and richer ways. *I see faces* explores the creative propensity for making sense of data in ways usually considered improper in a serious inquiry. It does so in order to value the ability to make unexpected links and to assert this as a key virtue of art education and research. The good essayist's practice is, according to Brian Dillon, about being able to see connections. The aim of the Press is for relationships to be made between seemingly disparate aspects, between high and low, the popular and abstruse, the over familiar and the overlooked – to accommodate contradiction. It tries to read material in such a way as to make new and mobile meanings from what is encountered. Ultimately I suggest that the constellation is a useful metaphor to set as an alternative to more linear academic theses, for which I take as an exemplar the constellationary thinking of Walter Benjamin: here, critical work takes place in the connection between fragments and between different objects, registers and discourses.

‘[T]he essence of pamphleteering,’ Orwell writes, ‘is to have something you want to say *now*, to as many people as possible’.³¹ As such, he considered that ‘the pamphlet ought to be *the* literary form of an age like our own’ for a ‘good writer with something he passionately wanted to say’.³² The fact that this was not so, and that such a writer chose instead to ‘water his idea down into a newspaper article or pad it out into a book’ was, he argues, because they lacked the channels to publish and distribute pamphlets; the publishing trade and the literary papers hadn’t gone to the trouble of making the reading public pamphlet-conscious – pamphlets were seldom advertized and seldom reviewed – so an author would be doubtful that the people they wanted to reach would ever read it.³³



FEW

In a time where success is measured by the number of social media followers, and the popularity of one's utterances or visual productions quantified by likes, shares and retweets, the Press aims to operate on a more limited human scale. I try (in a general sort of way, unacknowledged formally) to personally distribute the Press, in many cases putting it directly into the hands of my readers. In my method I am not so very different to the Jehovah's Witnesses standing patiently on city streets with *The Watchtower* in outstretched grip, though I'm more likely to pull out copies of the Press at conferences, after talks and readings. Since I'm interested in creating opportunities for dialogue, I'm compelled by the idea that I can speak face to face with those who will go on to read and look at the publications, or that I will do so in due course with those who have acquired them through other means. In my zeal for communication, rather than the evangelist's message of spiritual conversion, I am trying to draw people to think of things they might not choose to consider, in ways they would not have countenanced. Much is made of 'impact' by academic institutions and cultural funders, something that becomes largely about the number of people reached in terms of audience and participants, or the volume of citation. Whilst I understand and agree that publically funded research and creative practice has a duty to be accessible to the people whose taxation has contributed, and to offer value for money, I'm interested in the quality of human interaction, and enabling encounters with difficulty or strangeness, in the sense that there are matters that will never be popular or of any interest at all to many, but whose exploration remains valuable nonetheless (in creative, critical ways rather than in an economic sense). It's with this in mind that I have funded the Press myself, usually through monies earned in writing or speaking for other contexts, so that I am able to explore and produce publications driven by my own critical agendas.

Whilst working as a librarian at Chelsea School of Art during the 1960s, Clive Philpott had a standing order with Worldwide Art Books who would send twenty to thirty exhibition catalogues relating to contemporary North American art. He recalls: ‘Among these publications were what I would have then called “odd pamphlets”, but which might now be called “artists books”’.³⁴ This was a time when the term ‘artists books’ had yet to appear, and these ‘slight publications’ were manifestations of the radical break into 20th century conceptual art. One such example was a 1968 edition from Iain and Ingrid Baxter’s N. E. Thing Co. entitled *A Portfolio of Piles*: published by the Fine Arts Gallery at University of British Columbia on the occasion of the *Piles* exhibition, this portfolio contained fifty-nine offset printed photographs representing piled materials of various sorts, a text by Kurt Von Meirer, a checklist and a map of Vancouver. As a librarian Philpott had to consider where these strange things would be shelved, how they might be classified and thus how future readers might encounter them. Rather than separating them as a special collection, he chose to integrate

them into the library’s general collection so that they became scattered and dispersed according to subject matter. He enjoyed the idea of library users coming across them unexpectedly and potentially experiencing a ‘wonderful moment of not understanding’.³⁵ Perhaps Philpott’s classificatory decision related to his recollection of that thrill of uncertainty he felt as a librarian when faced with a major shift in art making ‘one cannot fully understand what one has in one’s hands, or what indeed is happening more generally’.³⁶



NOT KNOWING

I well recall the continual sense of not understanding that I experienced as an undergraduate art student whilst reading dense critical theory, watching long and mystifying films in which nothing really happened (or something was continually repeated) and poring over articles in certain contemporary art magazines whose ideas or language frequently baffled me. At that stage I thought the route forward was to master this not knowing and turn it into certainty. Since then, I have come to recognize not knowing as a state to be valued, something that can be sustained in making and thinking so that one is not aiming for a conclusion but remaining longer in a series of tests and trials which delay and undoes knowing in order to keep ideas in play for longer. In making art the recognition that one is becoming certain about something often prompts us to move on to what we don't yet comprehend (how to do something, or what the work's meaning might be). Emma Cocker has described a desire 'to stop things getting assimilated all too quickly back into meaning, from being classified or (re)claimed swiftly by existing knowledge'.³⁷ She writes that it is 'necessary to know how not to know' and that: '[n]ot knowing is not experience stripped clean of knowledge, but a mode of thinking where knowledge is put into question, made restless or unsure. Not knowing unsettles the illusory fixity of the known, shaking it up a little in order to conceive of things differently'.³⁸ In the Press, the essays and their companion volumes of multiplying footnotes draw out ideas in different directions, making it harder for me as writer/photographer/researcher, and for my readers to pin down a particular thesis, and know exactly what the text and images are up to, since they seem to be doing different and sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory things. By the third issue I had encountered Ross Chambers' neologism 'loiterature', by which he means a kind of digressive, dilatory, divided writing exemplified by the likes of Nicholson Baker, Colette, Xavier de Maestre and Marcel Proust, and realized it was a form I too seemed to favour. Chambers notes that whilst 'normal' critical work discriminates and hierarchizes, determining what is central and what peripheral, loiterature can't be summarized or reduced to a gist, and is thus already a critical genre. That the knowledge resulting from loiterly texts may be 'fringe', coming as it does from 'nondisciplinary artisanal, artistic, informal practices of expression, investigation, and knowledge' seems also to articulate something of the situation at the heart of artistic research inquiry.³⁹ Chambers identifies how digression links one context and another through a process of 'slide and slippage' such that, 'the new position one reaches is both linked with the first and discontinuous with it'.⁴⁰

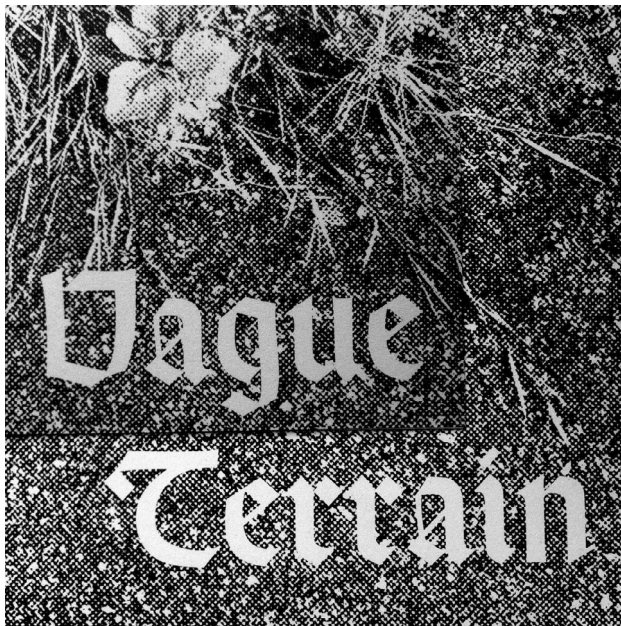
Today's independent publishing activity varies enormously – from imprints operating very much within the professional sphere (of literature, poetry, politics, cultural studies, art and design) to those produced without an ISBN and thus impossible to distribute through standard routes. There are magazines and journals whose focus on particular subjects and demographics appeal to a hip crowd and thus bring the support of advertisers keen to target the bohemian bourgeoisie, which in turn sustains the publications for at least a few issues. New sales models like Stack allow people to try out magazines that they may not have known about, the risk of a dud purchase ameliorated by a trusted curator. There are direct subscription models or Kickstarters designed to establish an audience, as well as those that exploit print on demand options, both of which reduce or remove financial risk and outlay. Some make short editions using domestic printers or library photocopiers so that production costs are minimal – intended for sale or swap at zine fairs, they are about expressing ideas and fostering community rather than making money, or even recouping costs. Some make publications as one-offs or highly limited editions, which are crafted in such a way that they command high prices from collectors since they essentially exist as art works. Some create a space for critical responses or calls to action around particular issues, perhaps exploring personal matters in such a way that this becomes political, as in the 'perzines' about mental health, gender, feminism or sexuality. Some 'publishing' has shifted wholly to the web via blogs and apps. Across this breadth of approaches to the idea of publishing, conceptually and practically, it is the zine – a term derived from the music and science fiction fanzines hymned by Teal Triggs in her historical and critical survey – that remains closest in form at least to the self-published pamphlet.⁴¹ Fredric Wertham, writing in the 1970s, described fanzines as being 'dependent on their independence' but distinguished between zines and the underground press or little magazines, though acknowledging some fluidity between categories.⁴² For Cari Janice Goldberg too, some years later in 1992, zines were things 'published on a non-commercial basis', as distinct from those that might be classified as small press, underground press or alternative press.⁴³

GIFT

The Press is resolutely uncommercial. Occasionally, in order to use the platform of a publishers' fair and engage in dialogue with the specific peers and audience this enables, I have offered the Press for sale, since where the other publishers or zine makers are selling their wares, it feels wrong to 'compete' by giving material away for free. In such cases, the small amount of cash raised usually covers only the cost of table hire and transport and fairs often end with a certain amount of swapping between stallholders. For the most part though, it is given away for free to those who have expressed an interest. Largely this happens after I've given a talk of some sort, whereupon I pass out copies I've brought along for the purpose – and sometimes recipients make contact afterwards and send me their own publications in return. I'm also approached by mail or social media, with people having heard something about the Press through their own networks, and I send out copies as a result. Very often I indicate that whilst the publications are indeed free of monetary cost, I would hope that I might have some comment or dialogue by return; there is something here of the principle of generalized reciprocity of the gift economy. In practice, this has ranged from a few words of acknowledgement to a sustained ongoing conversation, and even to the initiation of collaborative projects, as well as further invitations to talk or participate in events in other contexts.

Triggs notes how ‘zine producers and scholars alike acknowledged that fanzines build and promote DIY communities’.⁴⁴ Eva Weinmayr (a founder of AND Publishing) cites a phrase attributed to Andre Breton that ‘One publishes to find comrades’.⁴⁵ This line recurs regularly in discussions of independent publishing, where particular presses and producers seek to find and mobilize likeminded individuals/groups, or build an audience for their ideas and offerings. For Weinmayr, printed publications, posters or zines are ‘not necessarily the end product trying to convince anyone of anything’ but rather they are about ‘working towards establishing conditions for the co-production of meaning’.⁴⁶ This description is borrowed from Stephen Shukaitis, who makes clear that this

isn’t about spreading ‘an already conceived absolute’ to ‘an already imagined fixed audience’, but rather a publishing of resonance – ‘publishing is not something that occurs at the end of a process of thought, a bringing forth of artistic and intellectual labour, but rather establishes a social process where this may further develop and unfold’.⁴⁷ Weinmayr makes clear that for her publishing is a political act, through which ‘issues and ideas can be articulated and acted upon’ and ‘where skills are exchanged and knowledge co-produced – in public’.⁴⁸



COMRADES

Ulises Carrión's *The New Art of Making Books* noted how in traditional publishing the person who wrote the text was not usually responsible for the actual book, but relied on a variety of 'servants' to produce and bring it to an audience. He identified a shift amongst so-called 'book artists' to take control of all aspects: 'In the new art the writer assumes the responsibility for the whole process'.⁴⁹ Whilst this remains an aspiration of many artist book makers and zinesters, contemporary experimental publishing has increasingly tended to embrace the social process of production, seeing it as a collective enterprise. By 2008, Rachel Malik recognized the writing as being only one process of many in publishing – composition, editing, design and illustration, production, marketing and promotion, distribution, etc..⁵⁰ Though I identify myself as the author, the Press is far from a solo enterprise. The publications are the result of multiple producers being a collaborative endeavour with Sheffield design collective, Dust, and the various printers with whom they work. Once the writing and photography of an edition is nearing completion, I share the words, images and ideas for form with one or more studio members. We discuss this content, and begin to have some initial conceptions of how it could be presented. Since we collaborate repeatedly (and not just on the Press, as we have worked together on several other projects initiated by the studio and others) we can arrive at a mutual understanding of the work's aim, and rely on a trust that has built over time. Once I've left the material with the studio, they in turn continue the conversation amongst themselves before we regroup to discuss where the various dialogues have led. This is one of the most exciting stages of the process, since the intentions I had are developed in entirely unexpected ways. Very quickly I realize the formal solutions and innovations offer a reframing of the originating concept that brings it into focus in a new way. This space for creative and critical conversation is an opportunity for generating further connections and amplifying the resonance of particular aspects. As Alexander Starre suggests 'graphic design forms a crucial area of literary communication, a missing link, perhaps, between classical conceptions of visual art and language-based theories of literature'.⁵¹

In the introductory essay to her edited collection *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Annette Gilbert is critical of independents who claim their practice to be an artistic, social and political alternative to mainstream publishing. She suggests that it's not just about whether such practices actually live up to this claim but 'whether the underlying binary it establishes can be postulated at all'.⁵² There is, she makes clear, 'no *one* mainstream' since 'the field of publishing fragments into many diverse models and categories of publishing that operate on entirely divergent premises, business models, and forms of organisation, as one can see in the differences between trade and academic publishing as well as the POD industry'.⁵³ She says the 'truly alternative' is 'at best the offbeat, non-mainstream contents or design of the books, and the ambitions of these small presses; but it is decidedly not the publishing practice or business model as such'.⁵⁴

I have begun to understand that the Press is a means for gathering, mixing and multiplying metaphors, similes and analogies – recall the constellations, threads, webs, and conglomerations to which I've referred in the current text – imagery through which I hope to figure the rich multivalency of encounters with the world and the interrelationship of ideas. As Donna Haraway puts it in *Staying with the Trouble*: 'It matters what stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems'.⁶² The Pam Flett Press is trying to be a site in which the matter of forms and imagery matters in essaying everyday things, materials and places. Its modest enterprise, pursued out of curiosity and through conversation and collaboration, attempts to exceed or escape professionalization, and to offer its readers 'provocative and imaginative engagements with the world of news, politics, ideas and words', as Joad Raymond suggests was the case at the height of the pamphlet form in the late seventeenth-century.⁶³

ALTERNATIVE

Whilst I've sought to find ways of doing the work that needed to be done, and to have it appear in a form that allows its ideas to unfold, and concerns to be amplified, I don't claim my own publishing practice to be especially alternative – indeed I've shown here how very often it recapitulates previous models. I do though have ambitions to create alternatives to prevailing conditions in the professionalized academic mainstream. Through the Press, I find myself repeating Foucault's call for a new age of curiosity, agreeing with his assertion that as academics we are suffering from 'channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient', and his suggestion that 'we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings'.⁵⁵ More recently, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's extraordinary book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* ends with a critique of current professional practice in the academy. In its final section, she describes how scholarship has been commoditized, whether through the European 'assessment exercises that reduce the work of scholars to a number' or the model in which academics 'are asked to become entrepreneurs, producing ourselves as brands and seeking stardom from the first days of our studies, when we know nothing'.⁵⁶ I think here about the constant claims to novelty, innovation and originality that one is encouraged to make, when so often the work we do contributes much more modest insights and subtler inflections. Tsing's position is very clear: 'By privatising what is necessarily collaborative work, these projects aim to strangle the life out of scholarship'.⁵⁷ She suggests that those who care about ideas are forced 'to create scenes that exceed or escape "professionalization" [...] designing playgroups and collaborative clusters: not congeries of individuals calculating costs and benefits, but rather scholarship that emerges through its collaborations'.⁵⁸ I aspire to escape this professionalization too: the Press's content is a care-full, critical conversation with the authors of books I've read, the works of art and film I've experienced, the ideas I've found via radio and other media. It is a compendium of heterogeneous interests, the result of connecting with other makers, thinkers, writers and bringing them into sometimes unexpected dialogue. I make with what I find amongst their creative and critical productions: these makers, writers and thinkers construct me. Brian Dillon has described how he thinks of the essay 'as a kind of conglomerate: an aggregate either of diverse materials or disparate ways of saying the same or similar things'.⁵⁹ Later he refers to something 'dredged up by the bucketload from a gravel pit, or flung together out of waste products, pulverized and repurposed'.⁶⁰ I enjoy his analogy, since my father was a dry stone waller and the properties for construction with different sorts of rock have played a large part in my understanding of what it is possible to make in and of the world. He taught me that building walls wasn't like a jigsaw puzzle where pieces were designed to fit perfectly, and thus one wasn't ever looking for the stone exactly matching a space, but rather to find approximate conjunction that worked (kept the masonry course level, knitted the wall's exterior faces together), using what was to hand with minimal alteration. I suspect this early 'training' informed my choices to use the ordinary matter around me – gum, graffiti, plastic grocery bags – as stuff with which to think. The matter of *matsutake* fungi – the focus of Tsing's inquiry – does the same thing for her critique of the professionalized academy: 'Thinking through mushrooms, once again, can help.' 'What if,' she writes, 'we imagined intellectual life as a peasant woodland' (a site she has studied across several continents for its ability to create conditions in which the fungi flourishes) from which she then asserts that: 'To encourage the unknown potential of scholarly advances – like the unexpected bounty of a nest of mushrooms – requires sustaining the common work of the intellectual woodland'.⁶¹

NOTES

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