

Some Thoughts about The Chapbook
On The Tenth Year of Publishing Seeing Eye Books★

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SEEING EYE BOOKS is ten years old this year and this December its fortieth title will be published. For those unfamiliar with the imprint, Seeing Eye Books is a small poetry press that annually publishes four chapbooks sold as a series via subscription. Since March 1997 it has presented writing by poets young and old, well known and little known, from both the U.S. and abroad. Their respective works are quite different, as one might expect, and range from fairly straightforward lyric poetry, to polyformal, “experimental” writing, to strictly visual poems. Some of the pieces were conceived of as sections of larger works, while others were intended as autonomous texts. The sheer variety of the writing has often caused me to consider the various ways in which poetry can and frequently does engage the chapbook format, which seems to me distinct from the book format in ways that I’ll try to put down here.

The most immediate difference between the two formats – the chief difference it would seem – is length, though page count alone is not enough to distinguish them from one another in any meaningful way. This is because the number of pages does little to address the specificity of the chapbook as a medium for (I’m tempted to say *a genre of*) poetry, for, in my opinion, the chapbook is not merely a short book, at least, no more than a haiku is merely a short poem or Webern’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra* short symphonic works that would resemble those by Schoenberg or Berg if they were a bit longer. Though length is a defining feature of the chapbook format, it is not *the* defining feature. Rather, it is the use one makes of the more limited space the chapbook affords, as well as the way in which that length informs and defines the work that, in the best of cases, sets it apart from the book. I’ll illustrate this idea with some examples from the Seeing Eye Books catalogue.

For those writers who actually engage the format, the chapbook can be challenging – it requires focus and concentration since all must be accomplished in relatively few pages. This material constraint seems particularly appropriate for textually dense works. Clark Coolidge’s *Book of Stirs*, Valère Novarina’s *Adramelech’s Monologue*, and Mostafa Nissabouri’s *Approach to the Desert Space*, for example, are all characterized by a verbal intensity that benefits from the chapbook format, since it would be difficult to sustain – by either the writer or the reader – in a book-length text. Both the Novarina and the Coolidge pieces read like relentless, hallucinatory incantations, and derive much of their effect from the tension between the energy of the writing on the one hand and the actual span of the text (15 solid, prose-format pages for the former, 36 pages of verse for the latter) on the other. Nissabouri’s poem is also notable for its lyrical

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drive and metaphorical complexity, as well as for its rhizomatic syntactic structure, of which the following stanza is a typical example:

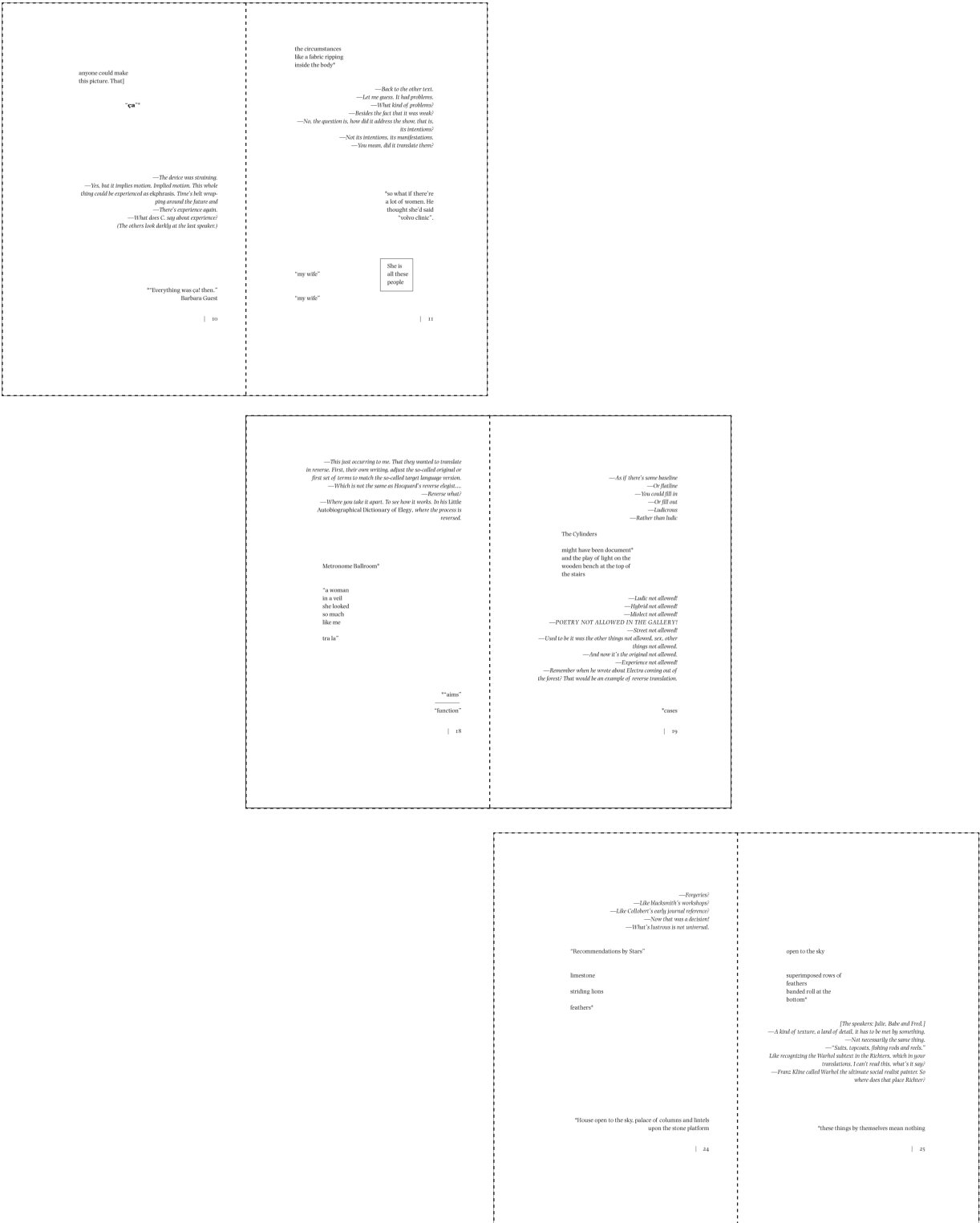
[an] itinerary free of otherwise more removable regions
major for its intermittences refractory for its roots
back country in the mobility of the preterit
should my speaking ever be articulated
through the angle of generic meandering
in a sustained persistence of fossilized archways
in which the permanently closed sky
sealed with terra cotta wagers
dominated by its relationship with the other sky pursuing
a coercive blueness over the tops of the palm trees
and which lives on the fringe neither within nor without
disengaged from an auroral remainder but subordinate
to disruptions in the crossing
though all other realities have turned into
repetitive dunes
that it oscillates between the edges of writing
and the deeply established horizon of antithetical shorelines
attributing sight to graves
submerged in paradoxical night

The “sustained persistence” of Nissabouri’s 27-page *Approach to the Desert Space* utilizes well the restricted space of the chapbook, as if testing the resilience of the poetic text. In other cases, it is the form of the work that benefits most from the limited length of the format. I’m thinking here of poems that feature unusual or involved structures whose intricacy might prove too arduous for extended reading.

Jen Hofer’s *lawless* is one such piece. It is a poem in three voices, as it were, and has a suitably polyphonic form: each page contains an italicized, title-like line at the top, a four-line stanza below it, and, at the bottom, a footnote-like line, also italicized and set in smaller type. This form poses an interesting problem for the reader: though *lawless* certainly lends itself to conventional, linear reading, we may also approach it like a score, since its very structure encourages us to read both down and across pages. Score reading requires a certain mental dexterity, since one must be able to follow each line individually and at the same time grasp how all lines are working together. Just as in musical composition, Hofer complicates this process through the inclusion of frequent refrains and echoes between voices (in this case, between the title-like line and the footnote-like line), causing the reader to jump from the one to the other, back and forth across pages. Read in this way, *lawless* is an exhilarating, though difficult work.

Norma Cole’s *a little a & a* seems to call for a similarly dynamic reading strategy, though it is baroque where *lawless* is minimalist, and thus has an even denser textual fabric. It incorporates, in no immediately apparent logical arrangement, dialogue, passages of both verse and prose,

frequent, enigmatic footnotes, occasional words enclosed in boxes, a pair of what could be charts, and two sketches. The text is organized in irregular blocks set in patterns that change from page to page: the dialogue, always italicized, is set hard right, as are the footnotes; prose and verse passages, set in roman, are all hard left, though in varying line-lengths and indented differently, all of which makes for a very lively page, as the following spreads show:



a little a & a's verbal content reflects its formal heterogeneity: it comprises numerous quotations, as well as comments on art, literature, poetry, and translation, many of these fragmentary or otherwise incomplete. It concludes with a "dream play," set in verse and which resembles a short, lyric poem. With its variously shaped text blocks and their recombinant patterns *a little a & a* suggests a temporally shifting textual map, its constituent regions defined by the text's respective contours and patterns. This opens an interesting door for the reader: as with *lawless*, the reader can approach the text in at least two ways: we can follow the prescribed, linear route (left-to-right, top-to-bottom, then on to the next page), or consider any number of alternate disjunctive routes and detours. These might have us skipping from text chunk to text chunk across pages and back, reading thematically or typographically, in an essentially associative way.

Like the Coolidge, Novarina, and Nissabouri titles mentioned above, both *lawless* and *a little a & a* are well suited to chapbook format which, with its more limited range, more tightly girders the complex, architectural structures that define them and which might collapse if they were stretched out to book length.

Finally, the chapbook format also seems ideal for those sequential or serial works which by their very nature could not be lengthened without compromising their conceptual integrity. In 2002 Seeing Eye Books coincidentally published two works having the box as their central metaphor: Catherine Wagner's *Boxes* and Rosmarie Waldrop's *Cornell Boxes*. Both works also utilize variants of what Cage dubbed "square root form," where micro and macro level structures are coincident, to further evoke the notion of the poem as container.

Waldrop's stately *Cornell Boxes* is made up of eight symmetrically structured prose poems, each one containing four paragraphs of four sentences each, as well as four footnotes, thus suggesting the four sides of a box, as well as an inside (the paragraphs) and an outside (the footnotes). Their titles ("Enigma Box," "Star Box," "Cinder Box," "Tool Box," etc.) reinforce the metaphor of the poem as a box, ostensibly "containing" the items indicated in the title, though only metaphorically so. Wagner's *Boxes* plays on the notion of the box's six surfaces – four sides, a top and a bottom. It is made up of 36 poems of six lines each, each line containing six syllables and each poem – so the author assured me – six "secret ingredients." The box-poems are verbal portraits whose titles are dedications ("A Box for Carlyle," "A Box for Maud," etc.) to the people whose lexical effigies they contain. These enigmatic texts are compact, hard-edged, and jangly, recalling Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*, from which they take their epigraph. Here are one of each, the first by Wagner, the second by Waldrop:

A Box for Claudia

forest reticulum
nuzzle soapy yuck face
inside dark green olive
ravenous nickering
black emotion spanker
respray your wonderjets

Am I caught in the stare of a Medici Prince or do I hold him in the cross hairs?¹ I myself have always been quietly alert. In my dream I both stood at the stern and struggled under water, but a gun is another story. Don't step on the shards, she cries, not with bare feet, so frightening the smart missiles, the limits of time and space, the implicational character of mathematical demonstration.

Marbles, cordial glasses, soap bubbles reflect the sensual world, while around my navel there is concentrated a circular² red rash. I am extremely interested in failure. The beginning of art lies next to the body, transitive fissure, with high waves immediately behind. Sun, sea, severance, and people in the street, she cries, what deviance from curved diameter and straightest line.

The intimate scale of childhood also attracts hourglass, clay pipe, and intelligent collaborators. Others may prefer columns of a smaller diameter,³ but a Mediterranean garden surrounds my Northern mind. I feel her tiny wet tongue licking my finger. The ocean, she cries, glare, wind, salt, scattered islands, limited income, it's not encounters in cabins, but chains of logical relations that compel proof.

Most remarkable, the presence of the egg. In a sea so calm not the slightest tremor suggested the tides of sexual impulse threatening the individual. The fact that we dream night after night surpasses the most heated fantasies. What lavish, wasteful refraction of light, she cries, deserted planets, desperate obsessions, do I have to invent everything all over, and without auxiliary concepts like the curvature⁴ of a surface?

1. to define with accuracy, a story on shards

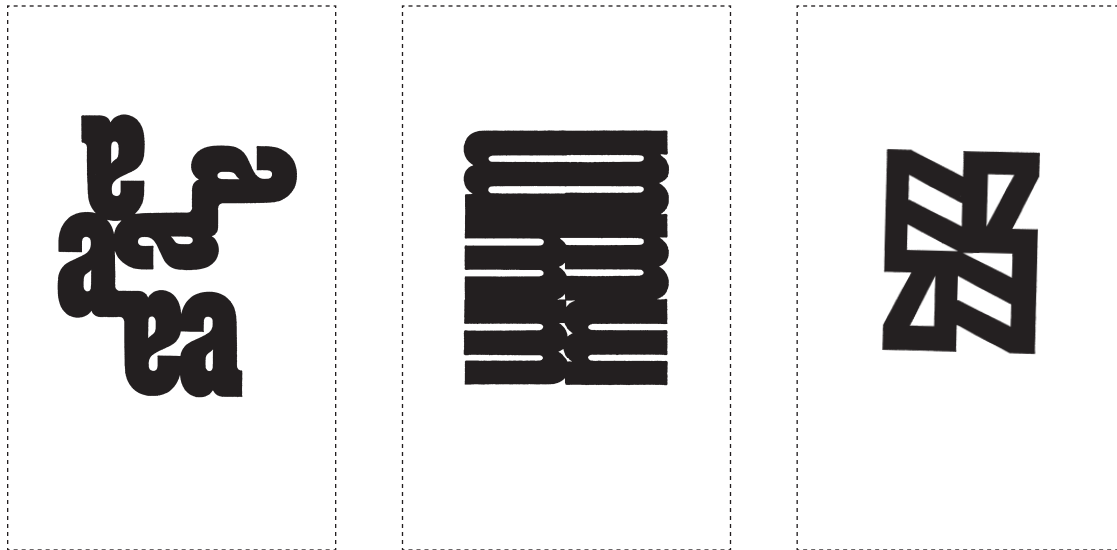
2. perfect, *obs.*, unease

3. through the center, and you must feed

4. the invisible if it exists across my eye

Having nothing to do with boxes, Hansjörg Mayer's *alphabet* nevertheless shares with the preceding works the formal conceit of comprising the same number of texts as its referent has constituent parts: each of its 26 poems is an optical "theme and variations" on a given letter of the alphabet. In fact, given its necessarily restricted length, the most appropriate codex format for this and other, similarly brief works is the chapbook. While *alphabet* could certainly be included as a single section of a longer anthological or compilation-type book, it would undoubtedly lose

something in the process – its ontological autonomy. No longer a thing unto itself but rather a portion of a thing, the annexed chapbook undergoes a change of identity, and our perception of it changes accordingly: it has gone from being a whole to a part.



Thus far we have only considered the relationship of the format to writing, but the chapbook has other, physical characteristics that distinguish it from the book as well. As above, these differences are related to but not a result of their length, and their commonality may well be found in the word's etymology: "chapbook" derives from the Old English root *céap* meaning, among other things, cheap.* Indeed, on a purely material level the chapbook may look the poor relation of the book, with its generally smaller size, card stock cover, inexpensive paper, and staples for binding. With a computer, the appropriate software, and access to a photocopier and/or laser printer, anyone with the time, energy, and temerity can found and run a small press. This has in fact been my M.O. with Seeing Eye Books. Every three months since March 1997 I have typeset, imposed, and printed the pages of each new title. After printing, I trim the pages, fold them, then staple them into the covers, which I have photocopied and scored beforehand. The chaps are slipped into envelopes which I then address and carry off to the post office, where I put stamps on them and send them off to their readers.

This one-man, hands-on style of production allows me to keep the chapbooks inexpensive to both produce and sell. Since I am the press's only employee and I work for nothing, I have only to pay for materials and postage, and these are covered – or so I tell myself – by the subscriptions I receive. While the inexpensive materials and low overhead allow me to publish Seeing Eye Books without having to pay for them out of my own pocket, unfortunately they also limit their circulation and thus guarantee their relative invisibility, and this is the one thing I regret about publishing chapbooks. Though I might reach more readers by attempting to sell them through

* *céap* also signifies bartering and business, which were important aspects of the chapman's trade.

a distributor (and few and far between are those distributors which would even consider such a venture) or directly to bookshops (ditto), in the end it would be uneconomical to do so, since that would mean producing and shipping copies which might not sell. And even if they did, it would still most likely be a losing proposition, since the distributor and bookseller together would take 70% or more of the cover price – \$7.00 in the case of Seeing Eye Books – for their services, and that, plus the cost of shipping and materials, would most certainly mean that I would be paying to sell my wares, something I am reluctant to do.

So the economics of the chapbook at once determine and are determined by its materiality and visibility, thus guaranteeing another of its defining qualities: ephemerality. This, too, distinguishes it from the more visible, more durable book, and this in my opinion constitutes its major shortcoming vis-à-vis the latter format. Printed in smaller numbers and reaching fewer readers, chapbooks do not lead the full, long lives to which books can aspire. Bookstores generally don't stock them and few libraries buy them, such that in many cases it is not an exaggeration to say that if you do not personally know the poet or publisher, you may never know that they have just published a chapbook and will most likely never see a copy. Certainly the Internet has helped alleviate the relative anonymity of the chapbook: many small presses have websites and/or announce their publications via email or on listservs. Though this gets the word out, it doesn't change the fact that the word reaches only those to whom it is addressed or those who know where to go to find it. As chapbooks are rarely reviewed, their echo doesn't sound as loudly as that of books, when they echo at all, that is.

For these and undoubtedly other reasons, some readers may well consider the chapbook to be something less than the book, which it certainly can be and often is, if only on a material, quantitative level. As I have suggested above, that does not necessarily imply a qualitative difference, though that of course depends on the writer, the text, and the publisher. To the question: couldn't chapbooks just as easily live as longish poems in a book comprising many such pieces? I answer, yes, of course they could and many wind up doing just that, though our reading experience of them is undoubtedly altered. Like the book, the chapbook is a self-contained, self-sufficient entity that by its very nature emphasizes, on a subconscious as well as on a concrete, even tactile level, the "wholeness" of the work. The virtuality of the chapbook text is inevitably diminished when the text is published in a compilation-type book, where such texts are generally one among many, however related, if at all, beyond appearing between the same covers.

Given the above difficulties and shortcomings, one may wonder why the chapbook remains so prevalent, at least here in the U.S. where at any given time there are a number of "micro presses" working exclusively in this format. One reason is surely economical: chapbook publishing is a relatively inexpensive venture, especially when compared to publishing even slim books of poetry, which are exponentially more expensive to produce but just as unlikely to turn a profit. This allows those wishing to get into publishing but otherwise lacking the means to do so to nevertheless promote writers they admire and bring their work to interested readers. It also makes possible a certain sustainability which results, at least theoretically, in a fairly stable periodicity, giving the diligent chapbook publisher the best of both worlds, so to speak: publishing brief but whole book-like works with magazine-like frequency.

Another reason to focus on the chapbook as a format, perhaps the best reason, is simply for love of the small work. All branches of the arts possess a tradition of the miniature/short/chamber

composition, and many, like myself, are irresistibly drawn to it. There is something innately satisfying about being able to slip a complete work of poetry into our shirt pocket and read it in its entirety as we drink our coffee, ride the bus, or wait for a friend to arrive. There is also something pleasurable about the object itself: these thin, modest volumes fit comfortably in the hand and promise a short, quick read, leaving plenty of time to think, digest the writing, return to it, take it up again and just as quickly reread it. They require less of a commitment than the book, but offer every bit as much “serious reading” potential, albeit in smaller doses. For these and other, similar reasons I’ve often thought that, with all due respect, Mies got it wrong: less is *not* more, less is less.