

# Dialogue



Unit Editions, an independent book publisher founded by designers, creates “highly designed artifacts.” Top row: *FHK Henrion: The Complete Designer* (Unit 13). Bottom row: *Herb Lubalin (1918–81) American Graphic Designer* (Unit 14). Both titles were authored by Adrian Shaughnessy and designed by Spin.

## Building a Book Business

Armed with a strong vision and a love of design books, Unit Editions’ founders boldly print the books they want to read.

And it turns out others want to read them, too. **by Steven Heller**

**P**rior to founding the London-based independent design book publisher Unit Editions, partners Adrian Shaughnessy and Tony Brook both ran design studios. (Brook still runs Spin while Shaughnessy gave up studio life to write, teach and do consultancy work.) Before the two met, Brook had done some self-publishing—and had caught the book bug. Shaughnessy had plenty of experience working with traditional publishers and found it frustrating to accomplish what he wanted. So, their meeting was timely.

As design book addicts, they both had the proverbial itch to see certain books in print, and soon realized that if this was going to happen through traditional means, they’d have to do it themselves.

Unit Editions has published some important books in just a few years, including a

major tome on the dying art of corporate identity manuals. Thoroughly impressed and a tad envious, I contacted Shaughnessy to discuss this seemingly risky yet extremely successful venture that he and Brook are so passionately engaged in.

**Starting a partnership is difficult enough, but starting a publishing venture these days may even seem foolhardy. What was your plan from the outset?** It requires a certain lunacy. A deranged love of books helps. Fortunately, we have a levelheaded business partner in Trish Finegan. She stops us [from] going bust and keeps a firm grip on finances, production and resources.

**Your books started modestly. Did you invest your own funds?** Unit Editions is entirely self-funded. Our first title went through the

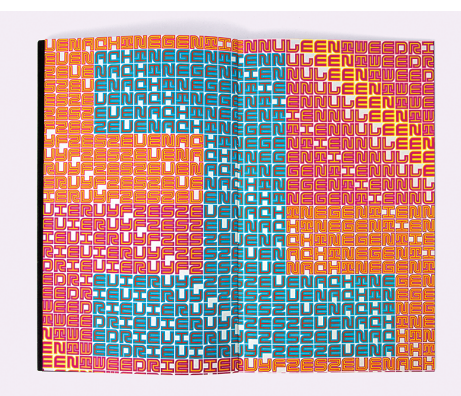
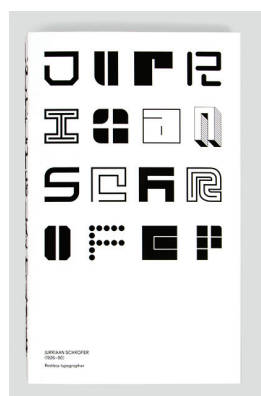
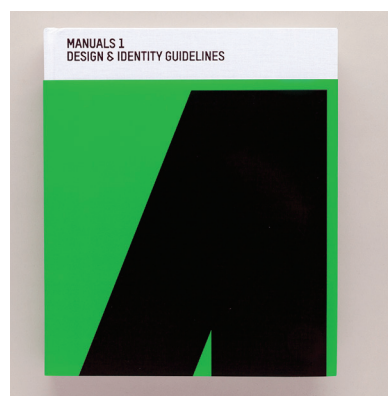
book trade, and the experience nearly scuppered us. But it also taught us a lesson—if we’re going to be independent, then we really have to be totally independent. This meant no book trade, no distributors, and most importantly, no Amazon. So we sell nearly all of our books from our website. I was talking to a mainstream publisher the other day and he said, “You’re a super-niche publisher.” I suppose we are.

**It didn’t take long for your project to develop into “adult” books—ambitious in scope and size. How were you able to make these leaps?** “Adult” books? I don’t remember publishing any porn or erotica? But I think I know what you mean. Early successes with our books on “total design” and “supergraphics” gave us the confidence to become more ambitious. Our book on Herb Lubalin was the first of a run of three major monographs; the other two were *Ken Garland*, and more recently, *FHK Henrion*.

All of these books require huge amounts of work. We photograph nearly all of the visual material we include in our books. This means long hours in dusty archives. Tony leads the design team, creating the



Currently, 17 different titles are available from [www.uniteditions.com](http://www.uniteditions.com). Clockwise from top: Essays—*Scratching the Surface* (Unit 11); *Type Only* (Unit 12); Jurriaan Schrofer (1926–90)—*Restless Typographer* (Unit 10); and *Manuals 1 Design & Identity Guidelines* (Unit 15).



covers and layouts. I work on text and general editorial duties. It's a lot of work and has to be fitted in around all our other tasks. But it's strange: No matter how busy you are, there's always time for the things you love.

**You don't sell your books in retail stores. Why not?** We actually supply a number of bookshops—but only ones we have a personal relationship with. Using our web-only model means we get paid before we ship a title. With the book trade, you have to wait months for payment from distributors. To function in the book trade, we would've needed to raise funds through investors or take out bank loans. Doing it this way, we're self-funding. Each book pays for the next one. I sometimes regret that our books aren't in more bookshops. Not just for the sales, but for the fact that books in bookshops enter the cultural ecosystem in a way that's different from the internet; people can handle them, be surprised by them, feel the heft!

There's one other thing worth mentioning: Because our main focus isn't on retail sales, we can take liberties with our covers. They don't have to have titles on the front.

**Has your strategy to presell through the web proven successful?** The preorder sell

**All our books are highly designed artifacts (but never at the expense of the content) and come with high production values.**

is really important to us. We offer a healthy discount for preordering, and we do free shipping to anywhere in the world. People in South America and New Zealand tell us it's something they really value. They're put off buying books from Europe because of high shipping charges.

**Restaurant managers always have to predict how much food they'll need to stock. How do you predict how many "units" you'll need to produce?** The Unit Editions Gourmet Restaurant? There's an idea. We have a strict, no-big-print-runs policy. We're really disciplined about that. Huge overstocks are the path to ruin. Small, high-quality print runs only. All our early titles have sold out, so we're not sitting on piles of unsold books, racking up huge storage charges.

**How do you create demand for your "products"?** By making the books as freaking good as possible. All our books are highly

designed artifacts (but never at the expense of the content) and come with high production values. We always find out what it is that makes an historical figure or contemporary subject interesting or relevant to a contemporary audience and present this through clear texts, essays, interviews and good captions. Get that right, and the demand creates itself.

**Are your books considered limited editions?** There are always a few thousand copies of each title. I don't think this qualifies for "limited edition" status.

**You clearly fill a need. Do you foresee testing those boundaries with even more ambitious projects?** We thought our most recent title—*Manuals 1*—was a high-risk title. Both Tony and I love these big slabs of ring-bound delight, and we knew there was a small and dedicated audience for a book on this subject, but we've been amazed by the response. It's our second bestselling title after *Herb Lubalin: Compact Edition*. But yes, we want to be more ambitious and expand our repertoire. There are a few titles in the pipeline that might surprise people.

**Can't wait. But I will. ■**