

Comics Connoisseur: An Interview with Dan Nadel

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Published on December 18, 2007.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design in Off the cuff.

Dan Nadel has always had a yen for design and comics, both historic and contemporary. Through his independent publishing company PictureBox he has married these two passions. In an age when indie publishing is all the rage and comics have earned high cultural status, Nadel is firmly in the vanguard, presenting fresh work by practitioners young and old, from the long established (Gary Panter) to the newly emerging (C.F., Paper Rad). How does he manage to succeed in an increasingly competitive market? And what standards drive his mission to make the world a better place for art and artists? We caught up with Nadel between deadlines, just long enough to get the skinny on his present and future plans.

Heller: Starting a publishing house from scratch—particularly one like PictureBox that’s devoted to visuals—is no easy feat. But in the age of “designer as entrepreneur” this has become a new model for practice. How did it all start for you?

Nadel: I started PictureBox with a partner, Peter Buchanan-Smith, to package books for publishers in 2002. It went by the name Monday Morning at the time, and we began by self-publishing the annual book of visual culture, *The Ganzfeld*. After a couple projects for Abrams we published *The Wilco Book* (2004) on our own, as no publisher offered a satisfactory deal for it and we’d had some experience in publishing with *The Ganzfeld*. *The Wilco Book* was a major success for us and convinced me that, insanely enough, I could perhaps make a go of it as a publisher. At that point, Peter left to pursue his own career and I stayed on solo with the able assistance of editor/designer Jessi Rymill and, later, her partner, Carl Williamson. After a bunch of years of freelance writing and curating, *The Ganzfeld* and *The Wilco Book* really convinced me that the best way for me to be creatively satisfied was to maintain full control from concept to execution to shipping to sales. I love the control and work with a variety of artists and musicians who also value control and trust me to act in their best interests.

Heller: I remember when you basically came off the boat—from Queens—freshly minted, wanting to do something in the design world, yet not being a designer yourself. You were already publishing *The Ganzfeld*. What was involved in making it a credible journal? Did you have editorial experience?

Nadel: Yes, that boat docked at your office. I began *The Ganzfeld* with two college friends: Patrick Smith and Timothy Hodler, both awesome, creative people. I didn't have any editorial experience, but was somehow convinced that didn't matter. That, of course, wasn't true—it did matter—but I guess I've somewhat arrogantly always trusted and pursued my (for lack of a less pretentious term) vision. To me, the most important things for a young publication are vision, taste and uniqueness. I like to think I had both in trying to make a publication that drew on art, illustration, design and history that I felt no one else was looking at. To me, it's about pursuing the unknown and mysterious and bringing those finds into the light. That's the fun part and, I think, the part that most excites an audience; rather than reaffirming someone's taste, you're expanding and sometimes exploding it.

Heller: What resources did it take to start the press?

Nadel: I got a loan for *The Ganzfeld* and then was able to put together a group of investors for *The Wilco Book*, which generated enough income—and thus, credit—that it was fairly simple for me to go on and get a substantial small business loan.

It takes money and luck, to a certain extent. It also takes a sort of retarded single-mindedness. That is, I sometimes think I move it along by force of will. There are rational, factual factors at work, of course, but then there's the sheer psychological strength or delusion required to build a world around oneself—to make something out of nothing. It's a kind of mellow mania. I'm quite sure you relate. Also, and this is something I learned from you, as well as Steven Guarnaccia, I think it's been crucial that I'd informally studied the history of visual book publishing via writing about it and exploring my early mentor's ideas and collections. I went into it understanding that there were precedents for this kind of activity, and having at least a dim understanding of what made those earlier enterprises interesting, successful or problematic. I still spend a lot of time doing that.

Heller: How did you find your content?

Nadel: Same as today: approaching someone whose work I admire and think could make an interesting print project. It's not enough that I like the work—it has to work on the page.

Heller: You're working with some major figures in comics: Gary Panter, for one, and Karl Wirsum of the Hairy Who. How did you attract them to your venture?

Nadel: I think what's attractive to some of the "older" people I work with is that I'm a history buff and like to think that I have an understanding of their visual heritage. A lot of it is conversation and understanding, and the fact that I'm mostly trying to explicate and chronicle, rather than sell. That is, the stakes are low, so perhaps I slip by that way.

Heller: Many of your picture books and comic books are done with relatively new and untried artists. How do you decide whom you will publish?

Nadel: It's a combination of thinking that an artist can make a unique and important statement in print and determining whether or not there's an audience for that statement. I'm most interested by artists who seem like natural book makers on their own—people who can think in terms of books.

Heller: What did you see in Ashod Simonian and Brian Belott that made you want to make the investment?

Nadel: Well, I think Ashod has really documented a culture I love: indie rock. And he's done so in unabashedly beautiful photographs. I love the spirit of his work, too: positive, whimsical and open. It's the kind of book I really enjoy doing because it captures a moment and culture in a way nothing else really can. Twenty years from now it'll be a wonderful time capsule. As for Brian, his gallery approached me to do a book with him. I was already a fan: The breadth of his work is simply mind-blowing. He's the ultimate paper-obsessed artist, combining a pitch perfect eye for found objects with an unerring sense of composition and color. I think Brian is simply one of the best fine artists in the world. Beyond that, he makes tons of one-off artist books himself, so he came to the table understanding pacing, design and everything else it takes to make a compelling book. I also think there's an audience craving immersive and experiential books like Brian's.

Heller: Do your authors receive advances, royalties, etc.?

Nadel: It depends on the book. If it's a collection of older work, there's no advance, but if it's being created from the ground up, there's some kind of advance. And then I simply split the profits 50-50 with the artist once I've recouped my expenses.

Heller: How do you finance the finances? Is it out of pocket? Do you have backers, partners, etc.?

Nadel: None of this is out of my pocket. That's kind of a rule for me. I like to keep the business and personal realms separate in that respect. It is more conducive to clear, level-headed thinking. Sometimes a gallery will fund all or part of a book, other times I get investors, and, as noted, I have a loan with which I completely finance about 50 percent of the books. They sell, and then the money comes back, tail wagging and eager to be spent again! So out it goes. And back it comes. And so on. And also, more seriously, I've just launched a fairly extensive online retail space through which I sell PictureBox products and books by artists I work with. I hope to offset a fair amount of my monthly costs with the site. So far it's going very well.

Heller: So the market for graphic books and graphic novels has increased in recent years. Why do you think this is the moment in history when you, along with other indie publishers, can actually make a go out of this?

Nadel: As a lot of people have commented, we're living in a very visual culture. It's images all the time, and yet I think people are hungry for material experience, as opposed to screen-time only. So, the dominance of visuals kind of dovetails with a hunger for handmade, or at least handheld, personal experiences of art.

Heller: You are up against some formidable competitors, such as Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly... How do you fare against their stable? Indeed, do you see them as competition?

Nadel: Well, I'm a very different company than those guys. Both are more or less comic book publishers. I'm split pretty equally between music, art and comics. So, I don't see them as competition. Even in comics we publish very different kinds of materials. Those guys are my pals and colleagues more than anything else. I have a huge amount of respect for them both... they're hugely important cultural forces.

Heller: OK, so you've got your finger on a pulse here. What is next for PictureBox? And what is next for this genre?

Nadel: I've just released four graphic novels—an onslaught, really—by Brian Chippendale, C.F., Frank Santoro (a reissue, with an introduction by Chris Ware, of his seminal graphic novel *Storeyville*), and Yuichi Yokoyama (my first foray into *manga*). It's a bit out of balance in terms of other sorts of books, but they are all kinda synced up to this moment.

I've also just publishing a wonderful photography book by Cheryl Dunn called *Some Kinda Vocation*, which documents life, art and liberty in urban America. I'm very proud of that one. Cheryl is a tremendously talented and important photographer, both as image-maker and chronicler. April '08 sees the release of Gary Panter, a two-volume, 690-page monograph that makes the case for Gary as one of the great visual artists of the last 40 years—I'm persuaded! Some future 2008–2009 releases include books from *Sonic Youth*, *EYE* (of the Boredoms), and even a book about the 1970s airbrush illustration and design of Charlie White III, Dave Willardson and Peter Palombi, among others. It's a good and busy time.

Heller: That certainly is an onslaught...

Nadel: Oh yeah, and in January I'm opening a little retail space in Gowanus, Brooklyn, designed by Helene Silverman and Gary Panter. Come see us.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).