
Devil in the Details: An Interview with Esther K. Smith

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Purgatory Pie Press is a sanctuary for artists, designers and typographers who are seduced by the kiss of type and the touch of metal. Founded by Dikko Faust and Esther K. Smith, the New York-based press has long been at the forefront of publishing artists books and ephemera. Both proprietors also travel the country teaching, lecturing and showing off their wares. This past fall Smith published *How to Make Books*, a disquisition and hand-book on the D.I.Y. nitty-gritty of this art and craft. We cornered Smith on a fine, early spring day to tell us how she makes books, prints stuff and otherwise revels in her art; during our conversation, Faust offered a few words on his typographic passions, too.

Heller: Where'd you get the name Purgatory Pie Press?

Smith: Dikko pied [spilled] an overfilled case of 8 pt. Century Old Style on his first day of Walter Hamady's letterpress class at the University of Wisconsin—he had waited three terms to get into that class—and where dropping the class and leaving town would have been the sensible thing to do, he stuck around and spent about six weeks sorting and distributing that type. Madison was cold and he lived far from the art building, so some nights he slept on the model platform.

Heller: Did you both have experience as printers or designers before starting the press?

Smith: I made posters in high school and college and also sewed simple books for creative writing projects. Dikko published a proto-zine called *Cheesewax, Plain or Regular*. He watched Nixon's resignation from the college's in-house offset shop.

We both studied art as undergraduates and both took printmaking; Dikko more than me—he TA'd the courses. He was involved in woodcut and etching; I did photo and silkscreen, too. I loved the "have your cake and eat it too" aspect of printmaking... sent prints to friends as mail art/correspondence. I edited Christmas cards, Xerox'd college graduation announcements... figured out paste-up on a need-to-know basis.

In college, I couldn't decide between art and English—or music, but that's another story. Dikko started in archeology and still does music. I began to design and hand-sew clothing in a drawing class. That led to costume design for theater. I responded to the scripts visually.

Dikko was doing performance art and hired me—my first job after college—to make costumes and embroider type on a uniform. Our wedding invitation was our first letterpress collaboration. I wanted dark red paper. It was hard to find. Looking for it I became a paper expert, and New York Central Art Supply hired me to work in their paper department—the longest four months of my life.

Heller: Why did you become so passionate about books?

Smith: We both studied William Blake in London seminars, but two different years. When I talked to the professors in London about Blake, they'd say, "There was a young man asking those questions last year." I sent Dikko postcards wanting info on Blake's etching techniques. Dikko had experimented with that approach to etching in London.

We'd both received special permission to work with the actual Blake books in the British Library reading room. Touching those books and working in that reading room, where I believed Marx had written *Das Kapital* and so many other writers and scholars had written, was an amazing experience that transcended the dull paper I wrote for the course. I remember a few years later talking to someone about the Blake books at a party in Chicago. I told him I'd looked at several editions of the same book. They were hand-colored. Blake would reprint the plates—some were from the 1790s, reprinted around 1815. The hand-coloring went from pale and sweet to dark and intense; figures were even added and obliterated. He said, "That's your dissertation."

Heller: Would you describe yourselves as designers? Craftspersons? Or artists?

Smith: What I love about books is that I don't have to choose between art and design, words and pictures, art and craft. As an artist, I'm a designer; as a designer, I'm an artist.

Heller: You've been operating Purgatory Pie Press for a long time, doing limited-edition books, cards and prints. You've worked with many talented illustrators to produce your card packs. What was your motivation in doing this?

Smith: One thing led to another. I wanted to collaborate with and publish writers and artists who were not well known—New York, especially in the early '80s when I moved here, had tons of artists—so we would meet them everywhere, and if we liked their work and it seemed like it would translate well to letterpress, we would try a postcard with them. Michael Bartalos was the first illustrator we worked with and he introduced us to other illustrators. We collaborated with the illustrators as artists. We didn't give them assignments, but looked at their work to see

what they were interested in doing. Most of them were not well known when we started working with them. But after a few years I noticed that reps would sometimes send us packets of work that looked familiar, and it would be imitators of the people we'd published.

Heller: Given the raw materials with which you work are becoming somewhat extinct, how do you maintain a sustainable source of materials?

Smith: The only material that is hard to get is type. Luckily type is reusable, if you don't kill it with too much packing and pressure. Anyone who wants to print with letterpress needs to be a mechanic occasionally. Dikko grew up helping his dad fix the car and other stuff around the house, so he can usually fix our press.

Heller: Have you ever veered into the new technologies?

Smith: We have done some projects combining letterpress printed type with inkjet pictures. Sometimes for jobs we hand-bind computer-printed pages. And of course we use computers for research. Dikko spends time exploring international libraries and e-turning pages of books that we would have trouble getting permission to see, even if we traveled thousands of miles.

Heller: What does the letterpress and wood-type experience offer that other printing forms do not?

Smith: Texture. And the collaboration with real type—and type designers—from the past is really interesting. I like to play with negative space.

Faust: Working within the constraints of hand typography creates its own possibilities and economy of form.

Heller: Esther, you've written a book about making books. Does this come under the heading of hobby?

Smith: Hobby? Hmm. Potter Craft, my Random House imprint, seems to be aimed at the neo-knitters, crafters, DIY movement. Since *How to Make Books* grew from my teaching, I think about my students and why they take my course, figuring they are the audience for the book.

Designers—like the ones who later studied at your SVA grad program—take my book course. They use the structures for promo pieces and products. Some of my students have gone on to their own card companies, etc. Teachers also take my courses and buy the book.

Artists take my courses and have bought the book to learn to make artist books. The course I'll be teaching in the fall at SVA is in the printmaking department. Compared to the painting and sculpture worlds, artist book [making] has been more accessible for artists. And some people use books as a way to break in.

Heller: Is the book, which some predict will become extinct, now a remnant?

Smith: I don't think the book is extinct. From what I read about those alternatives they don't seem to work very well yet. Even as some books become obsolete, artist books—visual books—thrive. I just put out a call for artist books for a presentation I was doing, where people wanted to see other works than ours, and I've been inundated with replies.

When I'm not writing, I like to read fiction. And I don't see the leisure book being replaced, though storing books is tough, at least in finite city apartments. For some expository books, maybe an electronic alternative will work.

Heller: What—in Purgatory Pie Press terms—is good typography?

Faust: Good typography involves dynamic equilibrium, tension and release, detail versus totality, texture, rhythm versus dynamics, negative and positive space, sound versus silence—not correct typefaces or grids. Good typography is like good jazz.

Heller: What is the most challenging piece you've produced?

Smith: *Vishnu Crew Stews Vindaloo Anew*, a book collaboration with Michael Bartalos. Dikko amputated the tip of his finger cutting the metal. The metal was not available and then we changed metals and couldn't get that one; finally found some and the bolts are non-standard, so we can't get more of those. We've managed to eke out a couple more copies—one to Yale's rare books collection.

Heller: What's next?

Smith: I'm working on *Magic Books and Paper Toys* (November 2008 release). We've done the covers—it has two. It's right-side up/upside down. We are also designing chapter openers and title pages for this book. The writing is done except for some final edits.

We are doing our third square-postcard subscription series—House of (Post) Cards—and our instant book subscription. And Dikko is beginning work on a typography and letterpress book. We think he will write it “as told to Esther K. Smith,” since he doesn't like to write as much as I do.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.