

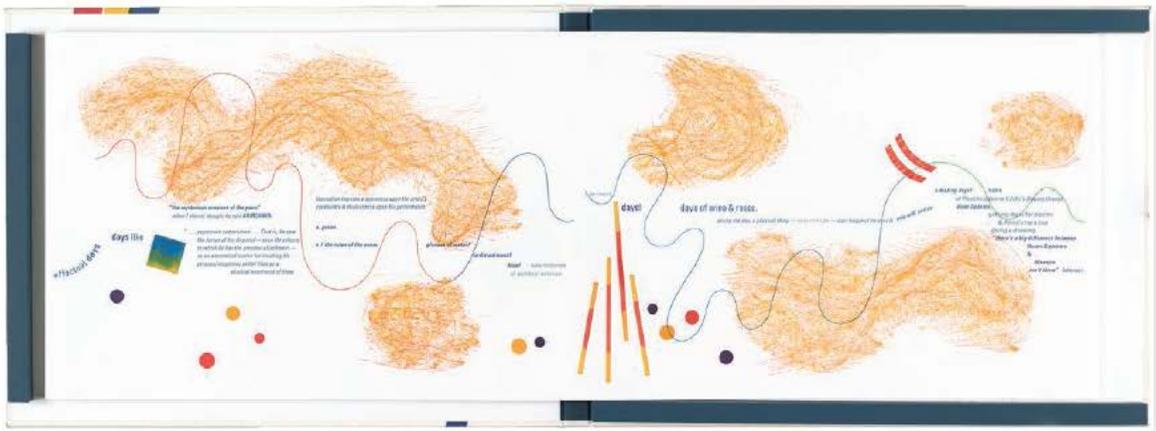
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The changing face of contemporary letterpress in Australia

Setting the case

‘Australian interest in fine printing, letterpress or offset, has always been delicate,’ said Geoffrey Farmer in 1999.¹ This is still true today, when there is far more international interest in Australian output than there is within the country itself. Australia has always had distinct waves of fine press and book art activity that surge and recede, connected to groups of people and similar waves of educational and technical opportunities.² One such surge was around the early 1970s, when printing technology drastically transformed (yet again) and letterpress was easily and cheaply come by; with it came a solid wave of activity that then seemed to crash and break in the mid to late 1990s.³ It is important, for the purposes of this paper, to separate ‘fine printing’ from ‘letterpress usage’, because in the space between the late 1990s to now, there has been more than a millennial turn.

There has been no less than a fundamental shift in the use of letterpress in Australia. The nature of jobbing work has changed with the advent of photopolymer plate. There are still fine-printing private presses, but even their boundaries have morphed along with the changes in and availability of different printing technologies. Lines have been blurred between craft, design and art. Pedagogical usage of presses and type has also crossed disciplines, moving from english/history studies to art/design teaching. Stocks of working, useable equipment have been decimated thanks to avid collectors



Ken Bolton, *The Terrific Days of Summer*, Katoomba, New South Wales, Wayzgoose Press, 1998

and pragmatic discarders, and while the purchase of new replacement parts and typefaces is possible, it is only through international channels. This has returned the letterpress process to an elite rather than an egalitarian past-time, also perversely returning our sense of isolation to something akin to waiting for supplies after the arrival of the First Fleet. That being said, the printing process itself is having a surge of popularity as a generation of digital natives grope for ways to use their sense of touch.⁴

From hand to plate: jobbing

The current meaning of the term 'letterpress' is nebulous. It implies, by the sheer fact of its name, that this process involves letters, or text. It also implies *handset moveable type*, although this is not the case. Many fine press-printed books rely on slug or page castings of metal type using linotype or monotype processes (where the text is machine-set and freshly cast in slugs or individual pieces for each forme, and can be easily remelted and recast) rather than handset type from cases of foundry type, which is more durable but wears down over time. Handset type has not been commercially viable since the end of the 19th century, when type-casting and plates and, above all, photographic processes pushed it into the realm of jobbing printers and those with more artistic aims who wanted to set small quantities of text. Still, whether set or cast, the implication is that the process of *letterpress* revolves around *textual* printing.

Printing text from plates is not new: in the 19th century, printing editions of books after the original handset edition used to involve stereotyping, in which the forme is cast as a plate (the word *cliché* is an onomatopoeic word for the sound that was made during the stereotyping process when the matrix hit molten metal).⁵ Stereotyping was part of the reason why first-edition books became a valuable commodity, as the printing was cleaner and crisper than the

stereotyped reissues, which, if a book became really popular, would be recast from the plates themselves and therefore degrade in printing quality.

The widespread use of computers and the invention of water-soluble UV-sensitive photopolymer plate liberated both text and image from the constraints of the grid-bound metal type forme. Much contemporary 'letterpress' involves computer output – text and images – converted into relief polymer or metal plates, with the printer having no contact with lead type (although wood type remains popular and hence valuable). So we have a new generation of printers who call their process 'letterpress' when they are actually just relief-plate printing decorative text and image designs with traditional letterpress presses, akin to the colour lithographic work of the late-19th and early 20th centuries.

Thanks to the internet, the general Australian public are most familiar with 'letterpress' in the form of bespoke stationery, printed from plate. This resurgence of interest is driven by designers who are looking for a point of difference in a tough market. That point of difference is *physicality*. Essentially, this is a new generation of jobbing printers, even though many of them also offer a line of 'letterpress art' in the form of editioned posters.

I sat down one day at my computer and counted over 30 bespoke letterpress stationery printers in Australia with an internet presence. Most were based in cities, but there are a handful established in regional areas: surviving, most probably, only because of the internet. They produce the same products: greeting cards, invitations and business cards, all printed by debossing platework into thick fluffy cotton or bamboo paper. This is what old-timer printers would call 'mash-printing', and is a hideously destructive process to use with lead type (some would argue that this way of working is also shortening the future of the presses themselves). The embossed outcome is satisfyingly tactile and looks wonderful when photographed low and obliquely with cast shadows in the pressed surfaces.⁶

One downside of this movement is the growing number of designers who advertise themselves as 'letterpress stationers', but have contracted a larger printing business to print their products for them without their encountering the press themselves. One would think this is indicative of the dearth of equipment in Australia, but it is not confined to our shores. There are many threads in online letterpress lists that debate the issue.⁷

On a more positive note, the designs are much freer than anything that can be done with moveable type, and they also have the flexibility of easily casting multiple layers. The plates print clean, bright colours, which can get muddied when using anything but the newest metal type. Registration, where

each plate is a separate colour that needs to be matched exactly to overprint, is a skill not to be underestimated, and all of these printers have followed steep learning curves to conquer multiple-plate registration on an antique platen press.

Consequently, much of the haptic skill of commercial letterpress printing has shifted from the typographic layout to the *presswork* itself. Obviously the printers themselves prefer the use of the word ‘letterpress’ as it offers a stronger connection to the sense of tradition and authenticity that they are seeking to value-add to their design practice (alongside other selling points such as the process being ‘environmentally friendly’ and the presses having their own names and identities), but the presswork is now where the skill lies, and it is perhaps more accurate when discussing these situations to speak of *hand-printing* rather than *letterpress printing*.⁸

The private press after Farmer

Geoffrey Farmer (born 1927) is a librarian and bibliographer who endeavoured to keep track of private press activity in Australia. His first listing of presses was published in 1972; his last was in 1999.⁹ His listings are tricky to navigate when looking for letterpress usage, as he did not define fine printing or private press production exclusively by the letterpress process – something that provides a good precedent for anyone trying to compile a similar list today.¹⁰ He was conscious of the difficulty of finding people in such a widespread country, and indeed, as time goes by, presses emerge that were omitted or overlooked by Farmer, such as The Writer’s Press in Sydney, operated by Nuri Mass, one of the few female sole private press practitioners in our continent’s history.¹¹

Recent attempts to update Geoffrey Farmer’s listings include Andrew Schuller’s research, partly disseminated in an article for the UK fine printing journal *Matrix*; a new but increasingly comprehensive website of Australian letterpress activity created by David Bolton of Alembic Press, and my own research site, *Pretext*.¹² Jurgen Wegner, ex-Sydney University librarian and long-time printing enthusiast, is another excellent source of press and printing information through his various limited-edition newsletters and bibliographies, most of which are held by the National Library of Australia.¹³ Only a few of the printers listed by Farmer are still alive and/or active: printmaker Lawrence Finn, who was 21 when Farmer listed his Actus Reus Press; Croft Press (covered elsewhere in this issue) and the Wayzgoose Press, which is undoubtedly Australia’s best letterpress export.¹⁴ Wayzgeese Mike Hudson and Jadwiga Jarvis are retired now, having downsized their incredible

print workshop to a small working studio, but rally themselves once a year to produce a typically scathing political broadside to send to Typomania, an annual printfest held in the Hans-Hergot Thurm in Uelzen, Germany.¹⁵

Between Geoffrey Farmer and today there have been presses that started and ended, such as Richard Jermyn's Indian Head Press in Bemboka, and the excellent Finlay Press, which operated in Goulburn and later Braidwood from 1997 to 2009 (all New South Wales).¹⁶ Finlay Press, using Phil Day's graphic skills and Ingeborg Hansen's writing and design flair, produced some of the most exciting untraditional private press work in Australia, second only to the Wayzgoose Press. They developed a distinctive house style: small, affordable, stab-bound volumes with handmade slipcases. They used original, irreverent texts and images and collaborated only with Australian writers and artists.¹⁷ Mentioned only in Farmer's later updates, Brindabella Press, operated in Canberra by ex-National Library of Australia Publications Director Alec Bolton, ceased prematurely with Bolton's relatively early death in 1996, with two books in production and many more planned, after 23 years and at least as many books printed.¹⁸

Geoffrey Farmer's wistful statement that 'I have a feeling that the Golden Summer of private presses in Australia may have faded, and that over the last 70 or so years we have seen the rise and decline of such endeavours', foreshadowed the shift of fine book production from the reproduction of often historical, but also poetic texts with original images, to fine artists' books, which produce a more integrated and materially preoccupied presentation of original text and original images.¹⁹ The Wayzgoose Press is a perfect example of this transition: the early work is distinguishable from other Australian presses only by the quality of the workmanship, but as Mike Hudson and Jadwiga Jarvis got more experience and were less caring of convention (apart from that of working to one's highest ability at all times), their output became more experimental and more closely aligned with the aims of the artists' book, the most essential of which is to push the boundaries of the book yet still preserve a quality of 'bookness'. Their combination of design nous, printmaking skills and innovative presswork is yet to be matched in this country.

Locating people who are working with handset letterpress is no easier than it was in Geoffrey Farmer's day, in spite of the greater sense of connectedness that has arisen with the internet. Many practitioners do not have websites, or if they do, they do not use easily searchable terms when writing about their work. Sue Anderson is a bookbinder whose Impediment Press consists of a complete and impressive letterpress workshop and bindery in Mosman, Sydney, that she shares with her collaborator, printmaker Gwen Harrison.

THE SIBYL'S AVENUE



My calligraphy on oak leaves,
centuries of truth—bleak
enough, it reminds you who waits
here, leaking memory.
The sky's not blue it's abstract.
Sparrows perch on wet ink and chitter,
just far enough away from a cat,
who chitters back. Their feet
print tiny marks as time
repeats its fact.

ROBERT ADAMSON

Caren Florance, *The Sibyl's Avenue* by Robert Adamson, from *Prime: 7 Poets from Australia & New Zealand*, Dunedin, New Zealand, Otakou Press, 2010

They make sophisticated artists' books of layered intaglio prints and letterpress with complex bindings and a consistent theme of interrogating Australian history in the light of contemporary politics. Their prize-winning work can only be seen on the websites of the galleries where it has been shown – and gallery websites, especially institutional ones, are notoriously bad at tagging or captioning details about materials and process. So unless you have heard about or seen their excellent work (which, once they break into the overseas market, will be as collectable as Wayzgoose Press work), there is little chance of discovering it online.

Printmaker Denise Campbell, working at times as Peedie Press and otherwise as Useful Arts, also flies under the radar, perhaps because she is located in Tasmania, or perhaps because she thinks of herself more as a printmaker than as a private press. In any case her books, some dating back to 2005, are finely produced, combining original letterpressed text with her own images seeded creatively through the pages.²⁰

Totally undiscoverable online at the moment (seemingly on purpose), is Nick Summers's Plum/b Press (the 'b' appears and disappears). For years

I would look at certain artists who had used letterpress in their work: Monica Oppen, Ruark Lewis, Peter Lyssiotis, Simryn Gill (and there are probably more) and wonder if they worked with the type themselves or outsourced the work. It was only recently that I realised that they had worked with Summers. He also produced all the printed matter for the 2014 Codex Australia symposium that was held in Melbourne, yet didn't make an appearance. Summers is a second-generation printer, his father being Bob Summers of the Escutcheon Press; his printing is superb, and his Sydney workshop is impressively chaotic. He is a fine typographer and a repository of information on type and letterpress printing.²¹ Other artistic 'jobbing' printeries are printer/binder Nick Doslov (Renaissance Bookbinding/Son of Albion, Melbourne) and printer/binder George Matoulas (Messofa Press, Melbourne), both of whom have also worked with artist Peter Lyssiotis and others (and neither of whom have websites).

And then there is the coterie of visible, active printers operating in Australia within the fine press/fine artists' book spectrum: Alan Loney (Electio Editions), Carolyn Fraser (Idlewild Press), Phil Day (Mountains Brown Press), all located in Melbourne; myself, Caren Florance (Ampersand Duck), in Canberra; and Sheree Kinlyside (Red Rag Press), in Townsville, Queensland.²² Claire and David Bolton of the famous UK Alembic Press are now spending half of their year printing and teaching in Western Australia, which makes them perhaps half an Australian press? We all work seriously with type, most of us integrating it with other forms of printmaking or markmaking, many of us working predominantly with books that hover between fine press work and artists' books. Loney is, like most of that list, mostly self-trained through long experience and periodic interaction with other printers. Fraser is thoroughly and formally trained after serving an apprenticeship in the United States; she takes the sharing of this experience seriously and holds regular classes in her Melbourne studio.

No doubt there are many 'presses' that have been missed, and this article is not intended as a definitive listing of practitioners. Confusing the matter are also the artists who use letterpress to make artists' books or prints as part of their broader practice, but do not identify themselves solely as presses, or have an imprint that they use irregularly when it suits: David Frazer (Unstable Press) and Lawrence Finn (Actus Reus Press) in Victoria, Red Hand Prints in the Northern Territory and light-trap press in Queensland are good examples.²³

No doubt private presses will continue to be established (the newest is perhaps *Officina Athelstane* in Rockhampton, Queensland), but the motivations for starting them have profoundly changed. The 'old school'

of printers would tell tales of encountering newspaper offices, letterpress foundries or commercial press operations as children or teenagers and being fascinated by the machines and the skill of the tradesmen. These scenarios or opportunities are now extinct. Contemporary 'origin stories' might involve seeing letterpress work on the internet via online galleries, seeing printing presses on Youtube, or visiting an art school on open day. Different motivations and different educational opportunities will naturally produce different outputs.

Hands-on learning

Educational opportunities for letterpress printing have also changed. On a technical level, 'vocational' training has shifted from an engineering/design trade emphasis to a visual art/design slant. Not so long ago, most technical colleges in Australia (TAFE or CAE/Colleges of Advanced Education) had a trade printing course and trained apprentices for the rapidly transforming printing industry by giving them basic letterpress training, usually with fully automated Heidelberg presses and the occasional vintage press for creasing and cutting purposes. As printing technology changed beyond recognition with the development of computers and digital printing, the machines were discarded, sold at auction or, at best, shifted across to the visual art departments. An excellent example of this is the equipment at TasTAFE in Hobart. Leonie Oakes, who was teaching classes in printmaking, managed to co-opt a technician from the trade printing department to help her teach letterpress to the students: 'It took a while for the skilled trade technician to accept the "contemporary art" ... but it happened. He now relays some of those stories when we have new groups of students.'²⁴ The extensive collection of type and equipment is now co-located with the University of Tasmania's art school. Adelaide College of the Arts has a similar story. Thanks to a keen staff member, Vicki Reynolds, they have built up their letterpress equipment substantially and it includes two proofing presses, a galley press and table-top Adana presses. There are no dedicated letterpress classes, but instead the process is part of the printmaking curriculum, incorporated into their book arts class and the relief printing class.²⁵

Pedagogical motivations have shifted too; presses once used for teaching bibliography are now used for teaching art and design. Per Henningsgaard, Kristen Colgin and Clyde Veleker investigated this movement in their recent article on antipodean institutional presses, published in *Script & Print*. The article talks about the way bibliography, the study of the material book and 'the methods of textual transmission in the medium of print as practised in the

handpress era' has been 'reframed as material cultures or textual cultures' with physical teaching processes written out of the curriculum.²⁶ As they track through Philip Gaskell and Brian McMullin's earlier listings of such presses to investigate their current status, they often mention that the presses are now being used by an art department attached to the institution.

Monash University is the best example of this retreat from bibliography to art and the only press in the country still to formally teach students both ways, although the balance has tipped towards art and design. Their Ancora Press imprint, originally set up solely to teach historical printing processes to scholars and English students, has been relocated from their Clayton campus, where the humanities is taught, to the Caulfield campus amongst the design and visual arts practitioners. Printing time is shared between the printmaking and artists' book classes and the Ancora Press stalwarts, like Brian McMullin, who produces at least one handset scholarly monograph a year.²⁷

While Monash has the Ancora Press imprint, few institutional presses have a press imprint attached to them. Lyre Bird Press operated for a period of time from James Cook University Press, and the Australian National University had the Edition + Artist Book Studio (which is not strictly an imprint, but published in a similar cohesive sense).²⁸ Lately Paul Uhlmann has purchased letterpress resources for the printmaking studio of Edith Cowan University, and initiated a research arm and student/staff imprint called Fold Editions.²⁹ As many university departments are increasingly in need of independent income streams, this may be a model for other printmaking departments to adopt.

The Australian National University School of Art in Canberra has a letterpress-equipped studio that has a history of mixed pedagogical use. Bought and installed for dedicated visual art use by Petr Herel and Peter Finlay for the Graphic Investigation Workshop in the 1980s, there was a period in the 1990s when the nearby University of New South Wales, Canberra (Australian Defence Force Academy), would send groups of students to the workshop to lay out history-themed typography to supplement their bibliographic courses.³⁰ While the Graphic Investigation Workshop existed, enrolled students had unfettered access to the equipment; now, as the Printmedia & Drawing Workshop, there are structured electives that incorporate the process. These days the press and type is still occasionally outsourced by another institution for educational purposes, most recently by the University of Canberra, to teach their graphic design students.³¹

While letterpress is an effective art-making tool, its highest contemporary pedagogical value lies with graphic design training. Handset letterpress is an



Denise Campbell, *The Night Green Suite*, South Launceston, Tasmania, Peedie Press, [2013]

excellent enhancement of contemporary design teaching, with its reduction of typeface choices, the radically simplified and strictly gridded architecture of layout and the physicality of building white space. Further benefits to creativity are starting to emerge with dedicated research.³² A good example is that of Design College Australia, Brisbane, which has an excellent range of equipment that is used as part of their design degrees, as well as offering short public workshops.³³

There are no longer many opportunities to learn letterpress slowly over time, side-by-side with an expert. Contemporary public classes usually consist of one weekend workshop, or perhaps a short series of stepped-level workshops, then the aspiring printer is on their own. In art institutions the teachers might have learned in workshops, or from consulting trade-trained printers, but the content of the teaching tends to be less formal, more interested in play and effect than perfection, in line with the reduced time available to teach and print.

The craft notion of ‘follow Joe training’ – knowledge/training decreasing like Chinese whispers as time passes – has become a reality:

The on-the-job training chosen by 65% of respondents is often referred to as ‘Follow Joe Training.’ This means that Joe once upon a time was trained by another Joe. Because he has never received any professional training during

his employment, Joe only knows 70% of what he needs to know to do a professional job. Now Charles, a new employee, is paired with Joe to learn to become a crafts person from him. Joe will most probably only teach Charlie 70% of what he knows, the rest is hidden in pride and job security or poor memory. If Charlie retains 70% of what Joe teaches him the theoretical results of this exercise is that Charlie now knows 34.3% of what he needs to know to be professional crafts person. One day Charlie will be the one to introduce a new employee!³⁴

The use of letterpress in institutions at a level that ensures user safety and reduced risk of damage to the equipment and plant depends upon the enthusiasm of individuals who care about the process and have the time to dedicate themselves to its practice. There are a number of institutions – art schools, state libraries, universities – that have equipment, but have no one who knows how to use it. The chances of their finding anyone to help decreases over time, and the equipment essentially becomes an exhibit piece, to be stored or discarded when management changes.

Access all areas

Once someone has encountered letterpress, the next challenge is to find reasonable and constant access to equipment. The optimal way to do this is to buy a press, and here the advantage of photopolymer output comes to the fore, as very little more is needed than ink and space and a supplier of processed plates. With handset type, the commitment to plant is much greater, and not to be taken lightly, especially given the cost of much of this equipment.

For those unable or unwilling to become a private press, public access to letterpress studios is hard come by in Australia, although starting to improve. Models are emerging: private workshops that offer classes and then access to the equipment for those who reach a certain level of competency, such as Carolyn Fraser's Melbourne studio and Lawrence Finn's Hipcat Printery in Kyneton, Victoria. Then there are printing museums that also offer access, such as Penrith Museum of Printing in Sydney. The Melbourne Museum of Printing has had periods of access to the public, but this has been inconsistent. The latter is unfortunate, as the extensive collection has a lot of potential in terms of training up a new generation of printers and designers; ironically the extent of the collection may have contributed to the dearth of a current generation of printers in the region by making much equipment unavailable for sale or for access.

There is a real need for proper public access facilities if the process is to survive. Starting print clubs in institutions – a night of the week when the

public can pay for supervised access after basic training – could be fruitful, and another small income stream. One model for this is Megalo Print Studio + Gallery, a printmaking access studio in Canberra that holds classes in all forms of printmaking (not letterpress, yet) and offers affordable public access six days a week, after a full studio induction.³⁵

What you see is what you get

Because the printing community in Australia is so disconnected, especially between ‘design’ printers and ‘art’ printers, it is hard to keep track of where work is displayed. The design community have their own preoccupations and networks; work tends to be two dimensional in the form of posters, prints, invitations or beer coasters, and exhibitions are held in design-based galleries, such as Kind Of — Gallery, Sydney, or works-on-paper fairs like the 2014 Supergraph, Melbourne, or displayed online.³⁶ Artistic printers make prints, but also artists’ books, so their output tends to be confined to art-based gallery works-on-paper awards including the Fremantle Arts Centre Print Award or artists’ book prizes, such as Artspace Mackay’s Libris Awards.³⁷ Events like the 2011 international Impact 7: Intersections and Counterpoints’ conference at Monash University, the now-defunct Focus on Books symposia at Artspace Mackay in Queensland, the National Gallery of Australia’s quasi-regular Print Symposium, the State Library of Queensland’s events and the one-off Codex Australia Symposium and Book Fair in Melbourne are invaluable chances for networking, but there is no organised way to sustain the connections, no dedicated societies or guilds other than the NZ Association of Handcraft Printers, which also runs an online forum, Letterpress Down Under, both of which welcome Australian members.³⁸ The institutional libraries have wonderful collections, but all of them would bemoan the lack of chances to feature them, with the exception of the State Library of Victoria’s permanent showcase exhibition *Mirror of the World*. There are no Australian private galleries dedicated to letterpress print output.

The case for change

This lack of consistent exposure apart from internet presentation contributes to the lack of public awareness and hence support for good work. It is hard to appreciate traditional letterpress work unless it is seen with the eye and held with the hand; the instant visual gratification of deeply-embossed platemwork pigeonholes public perception, because anything less ‘bitten’ into the surface, unless held in front of the eye, looks like digital or offset printing. There will always be printers who print with letterpress for the joy of the process and

the love of traditional books, but they are a dwindling cohort. In order for the process to be embraced by educational institutions and printmaking facilities, there is a need to rethink the ways that letterpress differs from other processes. There is so much that letterpress can do in an art and design context: the mere fact that it can print on surfaces that already have a surface build-up – not needing to be fed through machines such as inkjet or laser printers that are sensitive and resistant to surface irregularities – is a major selling point. It is valuable to remember that above all, it is a printmaking process, and can be mixed with all the printmaking processes currently available to us, most of which were developed as commercial publishing tools – lithography, etching, engraving (to name a few) – and have survived the transition to art-centric printmaking processes.³⁹

The impression of a situation of doom and gloom is not, however, really the case. While there is passion for the haptic and good workmanship, letterpress will continue. There will always be pushes away from digital blandness; the popularity of ‘rare trades’ fairs and craft fairs is proof of this. The main area of concern is for the equipment; it is large, burdensome, and difficult to store out of the way until needed. A lot of equipment was scrapped in the early 1990s when the computer was in ascendance; what is left is the last of its kind, and worth taking seriously. No doubt when the current trend for letterpress stationery is over, there will be another purging of studios and, unless there is a new generation of interested would-be printers to take those presses, they will be scrapped again. But without education and opportunities to display work, how will a new generation emerge? This bears thinking about, and discussion. In any case, those coming from behind will not be overly weighted by tradition, and the small pockets of activity that exist now – sometimes isolated – will continue in some fashion with the help of the internet for information and training. The output will be different, and different is not necessarily bad: it might even be exciting.