

KYLE SCHLESINGER

ZEPHYRUS IMAGE: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

by Alastair Johnston

Have you left something out:
Negative, says my Gunslinger,
no *thing* is omitted.

These words from Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger* serve as the epigraph for the introduction to *Zephyrus Image: A Bibliography*, the third in a trilogy of illuminating accounts of the coincident emergence of the artists' book and poetry scenes in the Bay Area that began with Johnston's *The Auerhahn Press and its Successor Dave Haselwood Books* (1976), followed by *A Bibliography of the White Rabbit Press* (1985). Sauntering through a constellation of typographic and literary characters, *Zephyrus Image* offers an astute history of one of the most inventive and fugitive poetry presses of the postwar era. It is too often the case that bibliography is misunderstood as a dry, totalizing genre situated between the reader and the "actual" text. In contrast, this bibliographer's praxis is informed by the postmodern challenge to the conventions of memory, narrative, and representation. Johnston's writings on the vernacular, his expertise as a typographer, and his accomplishments as a poet culminate in this innovative bibliography. This book is not merely a superb compilation of bibliographic notation (typeface, paper, binding, etc.) but a compendium of material, linguistic, and social conditions presented in a revolutionary form that is both lucid and invigorating.

Zephyrus Image was in operation between 1970 and 1982:

...a violent period of social upheaval in America coinciding with the Vietnam War, student unrest, the Kent State killings, the Attica Prison uprising (that resulted in the deaths of 29 inmates and 10 guards), the bombing of Cambodia, the Watergate scandal, the Black Panthers, the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement, as well as the right-wing backlash.

The era that witnessed a swell of NEA grants under the Nixon Administration also marked a sharp decline in letterpress printing, as offset became the preferred means of reproduction among most commercial shops. In turn, a surplus of presses and type became available to ambitious poets and publishers at very reasonable prices, yielding a proliferation of small press activity.

Such were (a few of) the social and material conditions that permitted the synergistic genius of Holbrook Teter and Michael



Myers to flourish under the banner of "Zephyrus Image" in the wake of the Sixties in San Francisco. Teter was the older and, Johnston suggests, more responsible of the two. He was involved in child advocacy and civil rights, and was active in several environmental, mental health, and peace groups. On the other hand, Myers came to San Francisco from Madison, and enjoyed drugs, skateboarding, and pranks. His work as an engraver rivaled the technical perfection of many of his predecessors, while his calligraphic linoleum cuts offered a meticulous yet whimsical flair that immediately complemented Teter's typographic eccentricity. While Teter was working at a shelter for runaway teens in San Francisco, he conceived of a newspaper and contacted Clifford Burke of Cranium Press who regularly invited inexperienced artists and writers to work under his supervision, providing free instruction on various methods of printing.

It was there that he met Michael Myers, who arrived at Cranium Press with a linoleum block depicting a Hippie Jesus in front of car radiators brandishing a crucifix wrench. Teter knew at once he wanted to work with Myers. They printed broadsides with the block on newsprint and Teter drove Myers back to Berkeley where they pasted them on the walls of the City dump.

In spite of the prolific nature of the press, very few of their publications and ephemera have survived because they took their message to the streets (or in this case, the dump) as a direct means of social action and political intervention. Zephyrus Image's artistry did not depend on the recognition of institutions, special collections, or galleries. Their audience was elsewhere. Salvaging cases of type that were of little interest to active fine press printers in the Bay Area, Teter and Myers combined first edition poetry with original linoleum cuts and "found images" reproduced from discarded cuts bought wholesale from old newspapers and job shops. Their collaboration yielded a striking visual sensibility with a tasteful randomness-at times reminiscent of the Dadaist and Futurists. Their preeminent rendering of transhistorical founts and stealth corruption of contemporary commercial and graphic styles would later become characteristic of the artists' book movement of the 1980s, as their work "questioned our assumptions about book-making, about content, about sequence and most of all, about the meaning of things." They were amused with the notion of dispelling the hierarchy of the genteel private press movement. Their ephemera combined the materials of tawdry and disposable products with a refined aesthetic

and artisanship that would rival the standards of their contemporaries working in the private press tradition. Teter and Myers printed on bumper stickers, paper boxes (for “snack-time ranch-raised gourmet earwigs”), newsprint (for Edward Dorn’s collaborative newspaper, *Bean News*) and so on, to subvert consumer and alternative culture.

Dorn met Teter and Myers in 1971, and in 1974 Tom Raworth (a seasoned printer in his own right) and family moved to the Bay Area. Raworth, Tom Clark, Jeremy Prynne, Michael McClure, Louis Garcia, Bob Callahan, and Lewis MacAdams were the primary contributors to *Bean News*, described by Callahan as “this vortex that Dorn could put everything anyone brought to him into. Ed was clearly the gravitational center, through the medium of those guys.”

In addition to books by Dorn and Raworth, Teter and Myers published an eclectic range of innovative writing by Lucia Berlin, Robert Bly, Stan Brakhage, Robert Creeley, Fielding Dawson, Joanne Kyger, and William T. Wiley. Much of their early jobwork was produced under the guidance of Burke, and included books, broadsides, and pamphlets by Lew Welch, John Ashbery, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Spicer. In modesty, Teter rarely took credit for his typesetting and often sold their books for spare change on the streets while broadsides and handbills were distributed for free at local bookstores, demonstrations, or in the case of the *Gary Snyder Brand Pine-Nuts*, discreetly slipped in among the goods at local convenience stores.

Through a scavenger hunt of Herculean proportions, Johnston has compiled an unprecedented history of 171 pages broken into subsections preceding the bibliography proper. Drawing heavily

upon archival materials and telephone and e-mail conversations, the text reads with the astute zest and lively wit characteristic of Johnston’s writings. It seems that Lew Welch’s proposition, “Guard the mysteries! Constantly reveal them!” signals the author’s ethical stance towards these historical investigations. (Welch’s command is also the title of one of Johnston’s chapters in *Alphabets to Order*, a landmark study of the found poetry in nineteenth-century type specimen books.)

Johnston is not only the author, but also the publisher and designer of this, the most recent publication from Poltroon Press, established with Frances Butler on April Fool’s Day in 1975. The layout is a work of art unto itself, consisting of 244 pages with 28 photographs and 101 illustrations of the press’s publications, most of which have been reproduced here for the first time. A useful glossary of printers’ jargon and terminology makes the work accessible to readers unfamiliar with the terms “slug,” “tweedweave,” or “zinco.” Johnston’s unmistakable appreciation of the absurd and the anecdotal occasion fuse with a unique typographic rendering, accentuating the twist and turns of the tales told here – enacting as it explains. This is a bibliography that hums with the hiss of fresh ink and the revolutionary practices that drove the press, engaging with the residual integrity of the individuals who made it go. It is essential reading for anyone even remotely concerned with the practices of postwar American literary culture, and an exemplary model (and challenge) for subsequent investigations.