



LAUGHING BEAR 108 NEWSLETTER

September 1998; edited by Tom Person; Copyright © 1998 by Laughing Bear Press; ISSN 1056-0327; Estab. 1976
P.O. Box 613322, Dallas, TX 75261-3322; 817-283-6303; e-mail: editor@LaughingBear.com
http://www.LaughingBear.com; \$15/12 issues, \$17.50/Canada, £15/UK & Eire, \$25/other

The Surviving Small Press: Censorship and Banned Books

The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE) has just held its Banned Books Week to raise public awareness of the threat of censorship in the form of book banning. Book banning is terrible, but there is more to censorship than banning books.

Accompanying this article are an excerpt from an open letter to the ABFFE, from John Bennett of Vagabond Press, one of the pioneers of small press as well as a noted fiction writer and columnist, and a portion of a letter from Karl Kempton, editor of *KALDRON*.

John Bennett's letter, the full version of which is being submitted to *Small Press Review* as a guest editorial, discusses censorship of authors that prevents publication of controversial ideas and works. Karl Kempton's letter addresses the issue of current purveyors of a genre censoring the past by rewriting literary history.

I'd like to look at how censorship can affect small publishers. It's easy to say censorship and banning are bad, but it can be difficult to see how they affect small publishers today. We aren't publishing porn or trying to overthrow the government (at

least not most of us). Small press has become predominantly a mainstream enterprise.

Thirty years ago books published independently were often at odds with socially accepted views on politics and lifestyle. They were books big publishers wouldn't touch. As a result, they were usually printed by the publishers themselves or small print shops, and peddled personally to bookstores or through book fairs or even on the street.

Unfortunately, the move toward the mainstream has also made independent publishers less independent. Small publishers are more sophisticated, and books need to be produced in trade paperback or cloth formats like the big publishers' books to compete. For that you need a good-sized printer. To reach bookstores, which have become totally computerized, there's no way to get on shelves without a distributor. Publishers are therefore forced to be reliant on other companies to reach readers.

Several years ago, when the desktop revolution was building steam and small press was evolving from kitchen table to serious small business, printers in a certain region of the country got a reputation for printing

(Continued on page 2.)

Open Letter to the ABFFE from John Bennett

Concerning your upcoming Banned Books Week activities: books in America that get pulled out of schools and libraries and then get spotlighted by organizations such as yours may be experiencing some postpublication censorship, but the very fact that these books are in print and visible enough to warrant your attention indicates that they passed someone's test *before* publication, and that's where hardcore, truly meaningful censorship takes place.

The other form of meaningful censorship in America is self-censorship, practiced widely and often subliminally by writers not out of fear of prison or physical violence but out of financial considerations and a desire for acceptance. Publishing in America, like almost everything else, is a meat market.

Having a book banned in America can't do anything except help sales and open avenues of networking that, if he chooses to exploit them, will only advance an author's career. If he doesn't so choose (and this acquiescence is signalled in subtleties and nuances), said author soon finds himself

(Continued on page 2.)

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 108

Censorship (continued)

short run, high quality trade paperbacks, and small publishers flocked to them for their printing.

As now, a publisher would put together their manuscript and art, ship it off to the printer, and then go about the business of marketing and publicizing the book to coincide with a publication date worked out with the printer.

In an alarming number of cases, however, the publisher would put all their effort and money into promoting the book only to find out as publication time drew near that the printer wouldn't print it. Someone at the printing company had read the book and found something offensive in it. Reasons could be sex, religion, violence, disrespect for mothers, or even simple misunderstanding. The result in any case was a devastating blow to the publisher.

Lawsuits could be filed, of course, but the damage was done. The promotion was underway, advance orders taken, events scheduled, but no book. Nothing could be done but to start over, which was often impossible. Not only was the momentum of the promotion shot, but the publisher's credibility and budget as well.

The mess with the printers got worked out when word about the printers' policies got around the small press community. The publicity generated resulted in publishers shunning printers in that region, and when the printers lost enough business, they changed their

(Continued on page 4.)

John Bennett

(continued)

consigned back to censorship limbo (i.e., total shutout) by a symbiotic alliance of forces that form an apparatus the individual parts of which would be loathe to admit exists.

Look at Donn Pearce, author of *Cool Hand Luke*. Pearce didn't trim his sails after the success of *Luke* and the box-office bonanza movie by the same name; he wrote a book (*Dying in the Sun*) that said true things in a very cogent and ungedged way. The apparatus went into action, there was a near-total review blackout, and *Dying* went straight into the shredder. Pearce, one of America's great writers, wound up a private detective in Tampa. Have you ever included *Dying in the Sun* in your display of banned books?

Look at the Cleveland poets of the Sixties, a ragged bunch of Rimbauds in their teens and early twenties who were on to something deeper than Liberalism and politically-correct rebellion; they had their readings raided by the police, they had their doors kicked in and their mimeo machines, books and magazines confiscated, they were jailed and harassed until some of them committed suicide and others quietly disappeared. About ten years ago, long after this poetic uprising had been crushed, Cleveland named a street after its central figure, d.a. levy. You know it's all over once they start naming streets after you. Have you ever displayed the books and pamphlets of the Cleveland poets?

And then there's Henry Miller, Moritz Thomsen, B. Traven (not an American, I know, but what the hell) and William Joyce. I'm sure you've heard of Miller and Traven, but do you know who Thomsen and Joyce are? They're writers of stature who say very true things in a very straightforward and eloquent way and yet they are unknown except to a handful of people. This is censorship at its best. Joyce has thrown in the towel on the whole facade; he spends as much time as he can in quiet out-of-the way villages in various central American countries. He got thrown in jail in Havana for defending the honor of a whore. But before he departed, he wrote a book that goes right to the heart of the matter and shatters the under-pinions of censorship – *Miller, Bukowski & Their Enemies*; it was published over a year ago by a small press (Avisson Press, P.O. Box 38816, Greensboro, NC 27438 – \$12). Needless to say, it has been well contained and will never reach a large enough audience to be effective. You should buy this book. You should buy hundreds of copies of it and hand it out to the people who show up for Banned Books Week. You should take it to big New York publishers and demand they reprint it. You should use your muscle to get it reviewed and then lean on creative writing programs to use it like a Bible. You should strike a real blow against censorship.

John Bennett and Vagabond Press can be found on the world wide web at <http://www.eburg.com/~bangsj>.

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 108

KALDRON

Earlier this year, Karl Kempton, editor of KALDRON, sent me a letter concerning his magazine going online. Since 1976, KALDRON has been a cutting edge forum for visual poetry. I'm quoting a portion of the letter here as it concerns another kind of censorship: a censorship of heritage.

Since you are now reviewing and promoting web sites, I suggest you take a look at the *KALDRON* site and Karl Young's Light and Dust book site (<http://www.concentric.net/~lbdb/ldhome.htm>) of which *KALDRON* is now a part.

KALDRON has had to go electronic in defense of visual poetry. The following will give you a brief update of the current visual poetry scene in America. *KALDRON* is online only to provide viewers/readers with an alternative and keep alive world-class visual poetry.

Some of the old concrete poets have allied themselves with the "language" poets to redefine visual poetry and *rewrite* its history. They want to limit visual poetry to textual use only. Thus, what took place in the concrete poetry anthologies is about to take place again – kin to the disappearing of the Letterists, the likes of Kenneth Patchen, d a levy, etc. This alliance has funding from universities and hence presents an overwhelming onslaught against all I accomplished with *KALDRON* and my own work. The only independent American visual poetry web site at this time is the *KALDRON* co-edited site with Karl Young and for now the web site of the local gallery

presenting "KALDRON WALL". Karl Y. does all the layout, scanning and heavy lifting onto the screen. All others are directly or indirectly tied to the SUNY site at Buffalo. A herd mentality has formed and is being led and orchestrated at the expense of anyone contrary to the "new world order".

Visual poets are apparently – blindly or full open eyed – selling their integrity out for short term money and ego recognition. This is a repeat of the misleading concrete anthologies published in this country in 1970, including the William's anthology that did not acknowledge any other form of visual poetry. The Klaus Peter Dencker visual poetry anthology of the mid 70's informed me of the wide and diverse field of visual poetry. Until that time I had assumed the concrete anthologies published a wide not narrow point of view. They failed to mention letterism, the SIGNALISTS, the likes of Kenneth Patchen, d a levy, etc. The current scene is a replay of the 60's and 70's concrete anthology era and the current trend by the American language poets to follow in the goose stepping foot prints of the Italian futurists who supported fascism. This is not an open egalitarian group of individuals creating a situation of widest possible group and individual interaction. Several American visual poets including yours truly and *KALDRON* are being disappeared. The attempt is serious, hence the defense of bringing *KALDRON* back to the front burner after keeping it warm on the back burner.

As you probably know,

KALDRON nearly single handedly carried the load of keeping visual poetry alive in this country from the late 70's through 1990. It at least brought to the American audience major figures outside this country no other magazine bothered to. Since the last publication of *KALDRON* in 1990 until July 1997, visual poetry publishing in this country has been narrow minded and poorly represented the major international visual poets and schools. Currently, *KALDRON* is trying to keep the widest possible representation of *ALL* major visual poetry schools and individuals alive and available for the eyes of its readers/viewers and to introduce to new readers/viewers the variety and true strength of the international movement. *KALDRON* is *not* trying to monopolize visual poetry, is *not* trying to narrow but trying to expand its definition, styles and types. *KALDRON* is inclusive, embraces of all types and schools except those trying to colonize and create an homogenized dictatorial re-concretized dominance to the exclusion of all others while at the same time labeling them heretics such as the early concrete groups attempted in the 60's and early 70's or merely disappearing them into nonexistence by never acknowledging their existence and accomplishments. We do not earn any money nor do we plan to earn any money from this magazine in its current format. Nor do we have any plans to change our direction. The magazine exists to promote the variety of visual language and poetry throughout the world.

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 108

Censorship *(continued)*

practices and worked hard to regain their reputations.

The point is censorship doesn't need to be a government book banning or sinister conspiracy to be devastating. It can come from any direction and be done with good intentions.

What the printers did could probably even be considered legal if they had an obscenity clause in their contracts. But it hurt people who were depending on them. The solution came when the small press community came together and made it known they wouldn't put up with it.

Most small presses publish books they would think no one could take offense to – self-help, travel, personal memoirs, literary – a healthy cross-section of publishing as a whole. But when something you publish is taken wrong and you are falsely accused, you have to be able to rely on the open minds of the public and companies you do business with to pull you through. The only way to do that is to expend as much energy as possible educating the public as the other side, those who sensationalize whatever they feel threatens them, puts into inflaming mistrust.

The purpose of Banned Book Week and other events concerning censorship is to create public awareness of censorship, and reassurance that your fellow small pressers and other members of the publishing community will be there for you. You can't legislate fairness, but you can try to educate the public so when something unfair happens they'll be prepared to hear both sides of the story.

Announcements

- **The Publishing Law Center** (<http://www.publaw.com>) is a legal information web site for publishers. It includes 19 articles on legal issues related to publishing and many other useful resources.

- **St. Louis Publishers Association** has a new address: 244 Mid Rivers Center, Ste. 198, St. Peters, MO 63376; 314-278-2202. That's also the address for Broken Heart Publishing, which has a web site at <http://www.SmartDivorce.com>.

- **The National Book Foundation** (260 Fifth Ave, Rm 904, New York, NY 10001), sponsor of the National Book Awards, has a new web site at <http://www.nationalbook.org>.

- **John B. McHugh** (5747 N. Ames, Glendale, WI 53209; 414-351-3056), well-known publishing consultant, and former columnist for the *COSMEP Newsletter*, has written an article called "With Your Eyes Open: The Economic Realities of Self-Publishing". Send an SASE (52¢ postage) for a free reprint.

- **The National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources** (NAEIR, 560 McClure St., Galesburg, IL 61401; 800-562-0955; <http://www.freegoods.com>) has a free "Tax-Cutter Kit" that shows how to earn an income tax deductions by donating overstock inventory to charity.

- **The Writer's Voice** is a new web site at <http://www.thewritersvoice.com>. Author's can use the site to promote books with readings, photo and bio, and links to bookstores and the author's publisher and agent.

- **BookSpot** is a web site of book-related resources at <http://www.bookspot.com> and features book stores, bestseller lists, reviews, and info on reading groups.

- **Publishers Association of the South** (700 S. 28th St., Ste. 206, Birmingham, AL 35233; 205-322-4579; fax 205-326-1012) is holding its 1999 Publishers Winter Conclave January 22-24 in New Orleans. Some of the speakers will be Tom Auer of *The Bloomsbury Review* and representatives from Books-A-Million and Children's Books USA. Non-PAS members are welcome.

- **Amherst Writers & Artists** (PO Box 1076, Amherst, MA 01004) is host to a nationwide network of workshops for writers, AWA Affiliated Workshops. Their web site is at <http://www.javanet.com/~awapress>.

- **Florida Publishers Association** is presenting the Publishers Marketing Assoc.'s Mini-Publishing University and Vendor Show Nov. 7 at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL. Contact PMA at 627 Aviation Way, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266-7107; 310-372-2732; fax 310-374-3342.

Advertising: *Laughing Bear Newsletter* does not accept classified advertising. Press releases, review copies, and samples of products can be sent to the editorial offices. If deemed useful to *LBN* readers, they will be mentioned in the Announcements section of the newsletter. Insert ads, in the form of flyers inserted in newsletter mailings are welcome. Send 150 copies of the ad and \$50 and the ad will go out with the next issue of the newsletter. There are no deadlines. **Contests or any other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or entry fees will not be accepted.**

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by Laughing Bear Press, provided that US\$.35 per copy (\$1.00 for an entire issue) is paid directly to Laughing Bear Press, P.O. Box 613322, Dallas, TX 75261-3322.