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The DIY Literati

Many poets and upstart publishers are returning to a “do it yourself” (DIY) ethos regarding the art and act of publication. Upcoming zines and literary journals use web forums for promotion and distribution, resulting in connections between up and coming writers and publishers. Small independent journals such as *Beeswax Magazine* in the San Francisco Bay Area, and collectives such as BrokenTribe.com use this connection to conduct submission calls and promote writers. Lauren Shifley, co-editor of *Beeswax*, states that her magazine reads submissions year-round, and averages about 30-40 writing submissions per month, the majority being poetry, with a breakdown of 25% fiction, and 10% visual art. She also says that web forums have been an effective, if limited, tool in the promotion of her journal:

Web forums are certainly a useful way to get the word out about issue sales, news items, and issue submission deadlines. We find that sites like artistcommunities.org and newpages.com are especially good for this. MySpace is a good place to have a public profile that's viewable and a bit interactive, but since there isn't an intensive focus (as with the afore-mentioned sites) beyond social networking, we definitely don't get a comparable response from MySpace users. The best approach for us seems to be a multi-faceted one: we go to MySpace to "spread the word," then to more topic-targeted forums to reach specific literary communities...

Writers who choose to self-publish will produce books and chapbooks on their own using methods as simple as a copy machine and a stapler, or through extravagant means such as pay-to-publish web-based companies like iuniverse.com, Lulupress.com, or Xlibris.com that offer everything from a basic

paperback finish to elaborate hardcover copies. Then these writers often rely on live readings or other types of spoken word performance to promote their books. Struggling writers have for some time been using open forums like MySpace.com to promote books and reading performances, as a tool for getting people to purchase a larger chapbook or full length manuscript (a little 'taste' as it were), and also to build networks for peer editing. New poems usually end up in blogs open to perusal and comments by anyone who happens to connect to the site.

I started using MySpace as just a way to keep in touch with old poet friends in San Diego, and later friends from graduate school. I have, at one time or another used my blog or page for peer review but found the responses to be untimely. I sometimes use other forums to get my work out with mixed results. I have entered contests such as the Nanotales competition run in the United Kingdom by the arts and entertainment networking site Bebo.com, and posted my work for consideration in online journals such as *SHAMPOO* in the San Francisco Bay Area, and *Modern Drunkard Magazine* in San Diego, California. When I publish items in mainstream journals and competitions I find that my page or blog is a good place to send out a notice, but for me personally, there have not been quantifiable results. Although I have found Bebo to be an interesting concept in that it goes beyond social networking to professional networking for a worldwide arts community.

Usually, a bigger name poet will leave a bigger footprint. Jeffrey McDaniel and Bucky Sinister are examples of poets who already have followings from

traditional publication and working the spoken word tour circuit. So it's a given that these writers will have a promotional edge over someone up and coming in the scene. There are exceptions to this: two colleagues of mine, Nati Huerta and Solidad DeCosta, get a great deal of promotional mileage from both their blogging and MySpace sites. They use those forums to post notices of shows, parts of their poems, or to promote the entire book, and are often even able to find a couch to crash on while touring. Another colleague of mine and fellow CCA alumni, Myron Michael Hardy, does find a multitude of "editors" by blogging his poems, but he admits that results have been sporadic:

I find that for certain poems I post, I get lots of feedback. And other poems I post, I get no feedback. And this can be disheartening: you post a poem in hopes that someone will read it and have something to say about it, but weeks go by and no one leaves a comment. Even on the internet people don't make time for poetry. In some cases, yes. I find that poets of all kinds comment on my poems. And I comment on theirs. The issue with this kind of writer/editor collaboration is the same as any other in the way that you trust only those editors who offer valuable praise and constructive criticism to your work.

One unconsidered drawback to posting poems in online forums, according to Adam Duetsch, a contributor to the BrokenTribe.com collective, is that once a piece is put on an online forum it may be regarded by some literary journals as "previously published material" and therefore not acceptable for submission, and if the poem is part of a book-length manuscript its first American serial rights may have to be cited, and this includes web-based self-publication. This is a component of publishing industry politics. Journals are put forward to the reading public as foundations of innovation, places to access the newest writers. They generally want to be the first ones to present new works to readers. Self-publishing detracts from this because editing itself is an art form, a craft

exercised to control the overall feel and artistic vision of the journal or book.

The growing ease of self-publication poses a challenge to the publishing industry and a dilemma for writers. The current state of self publication creates a cacophony of individual artists whose voices began to cancel each other out. Each scene is supported locally, but momentum rarely moves beyond that. There is no quality control because the audience is so localized as to make everything subjective. Writing becomes a tug-o-war between patience and instant dissemination, of populism and strict craft. It becomes a question of who the writer wants for her audience. If the work is something the writer does solely for herself, as a cathartic activity, then the networking benefits of self-publication far outweigh these concerns. A poem may only resonate with the poet and five of his or her closest friends to have fulfilled its purpose. A writer can promote her work via word of mouth in the local reading circuit, but it probably will not add to or change the American cultural landscape.

That being said, can any generation of writers and editors change the cultural landscape? There is a little idealistic kernel within me that says: yes. Because I feel cultural change is made possible through consensus between an audience and the refined vision of many people who help shape and inspire the artwork. Traditional methods of publication can be a collaborative effort, a contract between the writer, the editor, and designer. When I have published in journals there has always been some kind of consultation between the contributor and the editor that inevitably has an impact, or contributes to defining the overall feel of

the journal. Laureen Shifley of *Beeswax Magazine* is very frank about her vision of this collaboration:

From the moment that we accept a submission for publication to the moment that it appears in the magazine, we strive to keep an open line of communication with our contributors. When edits are necessary, we approach them as a conversation - an artist's work will always be their own, and thus collaboration between the artist and the editors is essential.

Self-publication might engage collaboration between a writer and a multitude of “editors,” as on web forums, but opportunities for exchanges of ideas are limited by their timeliness and lack of reach beyond their immediate scene. What is being produced is simply not reaching enough people. However, writers will still be frustrated with the traditional methods of publication, the subsequent agony of the waiting game, the trial and error. It is possible that the current trend in DIY publishing, especially in poetry is manifestation of a change in cultural landscape. It could be construed as a reaction by poets trying to let the publishing industry know that poetry does matter, even though historically it has not brought in the revenues for larger journals and publishing houses.

Links Cited:

Beeswax, <http://www.beeswaxmagazine.com>

iuniverse.com, <http://www.iuniverse.com>

Lulupress.com, <http://www.lulu.com>

Xlibris.com, <http://www2.xlibris.com>

SHAMPOO, <http://www.shampoopoetry.com>

Modern Drunkard Magazine, <http://www.drunkard.com>