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The Book As Art



The Virginia Arts of the Book Center (VABC)

by *Beth DeFrancis Sun*

I remember being drawn, almost beyond my control, into a room that smelled of thick ink and well-seasoned wood; a place where large type drawers held tiny metal letters, and a background whir and whistle left me to believe something special was taking place. Various book-related elements—paper, ink, bindings, cover boards, woodblocks, and cutting utensils—were strewn about the room, and eye-catching examples of printed fonts and picture images were propped up against the baseboards. I had stumbled into the McGuffey Arts of the Book Center in downtown Charlottesville, and the hub of activity left me wishing I could extend my day trip.

Fast forward a decade or so, and I now find myself sitting with my college-aged daughter alongside Josef Beery, cofounder of the Virginia Arts of the Book Center (VABC), a program of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (formerly known as the McGuffey Arts of the Book Center). Beery has agreed to meet with us in the facility's new location in the Ivy Square Shopping Center, which is much closer to the Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia. (Professors Dean Dass and Akemi Ohira Rollando currently use the Center's letterpress print shop to expand the offerings of the University's Art Department.)

Although VABC no longer resides in the city's historic district, it continues to preserve and pay tribute to the book arts of



an earlier era. The same antique printing equipment (including a Vandercook proof press and several hundred cases of type adopted from UVA's Printing Office) remains fully operational, and several other presses and pieces of equipment—including a Chandler and Press platen press—have been added over the past decade or so.

The Arts of the Book Center continues to serve as a community access print studio, offering hands-on activities in letterpress, printmaking, and the book arts. Classes and workshops are conducted throughout the year, and Beery himself continues to serve as one of the core instructors. Beery also teaches a short course on the history of books and printing for UVA's Brown Residential College,

a “college within a college,” whose undergraduate students produce several letterpress broadsides each year to celebrate visiting poets and writers. (Beery also operates his own design firm—Josef Beery Graphic Design (<http://www.josef-beery.com>)—specializing in the design of books and publications.)

The animation in Beery's bushy eyebrows accentuates the cofounder's enthusiasm as he proceeds to tell us all about the Center's history, its founders and famous supporters, and the handmade books created by its members (many of which Beery has spread across the table before us). Beery speaks very fondly of fellow cofounder Calvin Otto (now deceased) who founded the annual Virginia Festival of the Book and was a very active



member of the Friends organizations of the University of Virginia Library and the Jefferson Madison Regional Library. In the new millennium, Otto moved to Colorado Springs where he volunteered in the development of library services for the Colorado Springs Public Library.

Other strong supporters of the Arts of the Book Center have included Janet Anderson, who served as a book designer at UVA's University Press; Warren Chappell, a

famous book designer with Knopf who designed "Lydian type" in honor of his wife; and Steve Miller, a teacher of letterpress techniques at the Penland School of Crafts



in North Carolina and professor and coordinator of the M.F.A. in the Book Arts Program at the University of Alabama's School of Library and Information Studies. Others include Terry Belanger, who founded the Rare Book School at Columbia University and later brought it to the University of Virginia (Belanger was recently awarded a MacArthur Genius Grant for his accomplishments), and renowned book artist Johanna Drucker, an internationally known art critic and book artist who held the Robertson Chair in Media at UVA and now teaches at UCLA.

Each November, the Center auctions off a unique book creation as a way to help keep the Center operational. Beery proudly opens up one of these books, titled *One Million Eyes*, by Kristin Adolfson, who is actually at the Center working at the time of our visit! The book—a personal project of Adolfson's that she worked on at VABC—contains 168 letterpress pages of "i's"—literally one printed letter "i" for each of the casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan from September 2001 through September 2008. The book is bound by hand with sewn signatures, and printed in a limited edition of 20.

In addition to displaying and discussing books created by individual VABC members, Beery also

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describes some of the Center's annual collaborative artists' projects. Examples of these include *Hesitant Ruin*, which contains images based on the theme of time, decay, or ruin (the title and direction were supplied by randomized pairings of adjectives and nouns) and *Indulgences*, which is basically a book of coupons granting the bearer a pass on some "modern sin, offense, lapse, peccadillo, or transgression." Examples from the book include: Permission to have a crush on your best friend, Permission to

eat endangered fish, and Permission for texting while dining with a loved one. The idea is based on the early mass production of "indulgences" (made possible by the Gutenberg printing press), which were once sold to those who sought forgiveness from the Catholic Church. According to Beery, this year's collaborative project is a bound volume of almost 150 pages of original artwork titled *The Atlas of Vanishing Knowledge*.

Many of the books designed and produced at VABC are housed in Special Collections at the University of Virginia, while rotating, VABC book art exhibits are open to visitors at the Center (now located in the Ivy Square Shopping Center, 2125 Ivy Road, Suite 5, Charlottesville, VA 22903). For more information about VABC classes, special programs, exhibitions, and the annual November auction, visit the VABC website at <http://virginia-bookarts.org>. 