back and forth, open and close:
AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN OSBORN

Editor's Note: This interview was held in Arlington, Virginia on 18 March 1983, postponed but not deferred after the great Snowstorm of 1983. Kevin Osborn's books have significantly contributed to the discourse on bookworks in the media, and we thought it was opportune to converse with him about his way of making books, and his theory about books made by artists in general.

When did you get interested in making books?
I started making books in 1972. I was an exchange student in France at l'Ecole Nationale des Arts Decoratifs in Nice. I had been making films and slide shows for the French Government. I was 19. One of my professors, François Cali, was an art historian, who wrote and designed books about architecture. (*Real Lush* is dedicated to him.) We got to talking, got interested in each other, and I visited him at his place up in the mountains. I still remember that day very clearly. We talked about books: paper and ink; pictures and text; and the complex relationships between those things and your imagination. When I left it was as if my head had been turned around, literally turned around. . . I suddenly realized you could layer many realities onto one surface. It wasn't a one-shot deal, but a continual density. It was always there. . . I could see books moving, pages turning. We talked about sequencing, about doing little tiny images in a book like a pocket romance. (*Real Lush* is very much part of that). Little sequences of stories, historical romances, meaningful connections. My doing books comes out of that initial experience of talking with him. He was a mentor.

I left at the end of the year, and I would send him book mock-ups. He would write back how certain movements worked. Usually his refrain was your sequences are "les petites miettes d'images" (little crumbs of images). He was a tough critic.

When you got back to the States, where were you in relation to your studies?
I was a student at the University of Vermont. There was nothing there in book arts. I had heard about Visual Studies Workshop and was very excited about the program. When I was at the University I drew up an individually designed major in visual communication. I started and taught a photography program in the Experimental Program of the University. We produced four offset books which we distributed, one of which was called *Mashed Potato Mystery*. A mobius strip. There are very, very few copies existing.

So your excitement about Visual Studies Workshop was very much in keeping with your interests?
Well, yes, I went there for a semester and dropped out. What interested me about the Workshop was offset, but I had the feeling I had to get some support system behind me and also that I wanted to learn how they printed books commercially. So I went back to Vermont and I worked in an old-line printing firm for two years. I did paste-up and camera work and eventually a little press work, but not very much. Essentially I got the discipline of printing beat into me. *The* way to do it. *The* correct way to do it. Occasionally they would take me off the offset and put me on letterpress, "Real Printing" as they called it. I worked on old Heidelburgs and Linotypes etc. I got to experience that overlap of technologies, that replacing of technologies when offset drove out letterpress. It's happening again now with the exchange of paper and ink for plastic and electricity. Offset being replaced by computers.

Were you surprised that the photography interest led you to the printing process?
Well, I had never been interested in photography per se. The idea of putting prints on the wall didn't hit any bells with me, didn't make any sense to me. I didn't feel comfortable with it. I really wanted to experience "open and close" in my work. I really wanted the images to move and be stationary. Layers.

Where did it come from? Was it the catalyst in France that triggered it?
Well, yes, it comes from a certain logic, a dialectic tension of presence and absence; revealing and concealing; inside and outside, and so on.

So you finally found a metier?
I found a medium. I didn't know what to say. Cali said it would take me at least five years to do my first book, and I said, "Come on, I'll be here next week and I'll have a couple of books," and I did return with a couple of books the next week but nothing of importance. He was just about right.

So who did you study with at VSW?
Nathan Lyons. I worked with Joan Lyons in the print shop. She was very supportive. Keith Smith (I would go over to his house and look at his books.) And two people who came during the summer I was there: Todd Walker and Stan Bevington, from whom I learned an enormous amount in a very short period of time.

With all that, where did your interest in books come from?
Doing books is like writing a long letter. I come out of a very large family, 45 people in my extended family within 9 miles of each other in Amesbury, Massachusetts. All one side of the family is French Canadian and the other side is Irish, and very very close knit, extremely close knit. So growing up was an incredibly vocal experience, voluminous, much the same as *Real Lush* paraphrases that experience, and I think for me to get into doing books was a way of solidifying that experience. Writing a letter back.

Also, my grandfather Riopel owned a grocery store catering to a large French-Canadian community in the town. I would wander in the store looking at packages and labels. Was the outside inside? A very direct impact of image and reality! And paper and ink! Aunts and uncles, customers talking back and forth. A very complex environment—overwhelming after a certain point.

It reminds me a lot of *Real Lush* with the overlay of verbal and visual images. So it's an evocation of your past which is a catalyst for your present?
I think your past is very important. Especially when you find yourself with 40 relatives, that's a past, that's an enormous density of memory. What interests me about books is the possibility of recording a past to go back to. It was a very loving, strong, close environment with all the advantages and

disadvantages that come with it. Incredible claustrophobia. But also supportive—if you got sick, or had a birthday you'd have 20 relatives coming by.

And also because you come from a French-Canadian family with its traditional and cultural roots upon which you had to build.

Yes, I was in the last class in grammar school that began in French. Speaking in two languages gives one a different perspective.

When you got out of VSW, you didn't know exactly where you were going. Was it easy to do what you wanted to do after that?

It was entirely fortuitous, a stroke of luck. During the VSW Summer Workshop of 1976, I met an artist who had a studio at Glen Echo Park, Maryland, just outside of Washington. This was an amusement park abandoned in the middle '60s, taken over by the National Park Service and then opened up as a space for artists. The Writer's Center had started up in 1976 at the Park. They had just gotten a Compugraphic IV phototypesetter and they decided they wanted to print books. (That's always the way people get started, "I want to do a book" which is completely blind to all the things that are going to happen, but the discoveries as you go is the joy.) Alan Lefcowitz, Chairman of the Board of the Center, had heard of me from this artist and called me up. I came down two days after I passed my thesis. I thought I was going to play softball all summer. Instead Alan and I started putting together the printing facility. We went to printers who were going out of business. We got our copy camera for $600, a platemaker for $300 and a press for $2000. We did a lot of scrounging and dug up all these old pieces of equipment. It was great fun.

Did the Writer's Center just start up?

A group of writers started it as a place to do readings, to have a bookstore, to be able to typeset their own books, much in the spirit of autonomy. And one of their goals was to get the printing started. What still interests me about the Center is people learning to speak in their own vernacular instead of the "Latin" of TV, newspapers, magazines, which serve an important function in society, but which express a public not a personal tongue. It's very important to provide an environment for individuals to be able to express themselves, through workshops, readings, and open access. You get a range of activity happening. Some of the books are extremely interesting, others are not. But it is the *process* of beginning to define, describe your own language. It takes time.

So you're saying that the structure of the Writer's Center is so loose that it allows for the freedom of each participant to communicate in his or her own way within the constructs of the technology that is available at that time?

Yes, it's a very loose environment. There isn't an *ism* behind it. We offer open access on equipment. You rent it from us as a member ($15 a year). You come in and use the typesetter for $6.00 an hour. If you know how to type you can produce a lot of your book at a very reasonable price. My role at the Center is to do consulting and design work with artists and writers on their books. For example, Doug Messerli of Sun & Moon Books was working on *Smoke* by Djuna Barnes last year. He came in and we talked about the project a little, but he typeset and pasted up the book himself. And now he's in his third printing. Some books we will design from scratch. Others we will assist the publisher in choosing options.

You don't have any prototypes to emulate; sounds like a unique situation?

The access is unique, but if you take this back, it's really Stan Bevington at Coach House Press in Toronto who started experimental offset in the 60's. And not by going to a commercial printer, but by getting some equipment and seeing what happens. I can still go into bookstores and reach for a book, and then realize it's one of Bevington's books—just like that! There's the ink, there's the paper, there's that lushness of attention to the material. Print isn't TV. It's really alive, it's a real substance in your hands.

Although it is called Writer's Center, it is available for visual artists who want to do a book?

Yes, we have a small grant from the National Endowment right now that assists artists in doing artists' books. We've done seven and have another five coming. The artists are mostly local with some from New York. What happens is they will come in with the idea of doing a book, and we will do some book engineering: kind of paper, type of binding, ink selection, experimental processses, etc. All geared to helping the artist find a range of options in offset to select from.

Also, we use a process called "positive plate" quite frequently which loosens up the artist and the printing. Positive plate is an offset printing plate that gives you a positive image when you put down a positive. In other words when you draw a line on a piece of matte mylar, contact it to the plate and burn it in the platemaker, you will get the line and not the reverse. (With negative plate, which is the standard printing plate, you will contact a film negative and get the opposite of the negative, which would be a positive image.) The positive plate is light softening, the negative light hardening. The important point is that you will get on the plate exactly what you put down on the mylar. You can do overlays and see the whole job before you get on the press. It is extremely fast. All the regular stone litho materials and techniques are applicable: tuche, conte crayon, wash, etc. And the best thing is that there is no darkroom!

If you are an artist who has been trying to do a book, you know the frustration of trying to do experimental work at a commercial printer. Commercial shops have other commitments. They're into volume. They have to make money to pay for the large scale of machinery and people who are working for them. We work small scale and loosely. The artist has direct access to the press, which means they can mix the inks themselves, monitor the effect on the press, and decide when an experimental approach is successful or not. The artist will frequently modify the inks so that they do more than just thin on the sheet. They can be mixed with metallic silver to glow, or mixed with opaques to sit up. The ink is the magic in printing. And of course since the artist is mixing the inks, he or she will have a lot of options with the color.

The printing itself is a slow deliberate process. The artist will work with our printer. The artist sees a sheet come off the press, they approve it or change it. Work it back and forth. It's a working process. It's not Xerox. It takes time. Mistakes are made, corrected. . . Definitely the real world. Pain and suffering at times, but when you get some gorgeous press runs it is an incredible elixir.

About how many books have come out of the Writer's Center since you began?
We've printed over 100 easily, that includes poetry as well as visual books. There has been an incredible range from *Smoke* by Djuna Barnes, published by Sun & Moon Books to Helen Brunner's *Primer* to someone doing their very first book. We sell all books in our bookstore at the Center.

Are you open during the summer?
Yes.

So people can contract with you to do a book during the summer, especially from out of town?
Yes, we've had a number of people do books with us from out of town, and it's worked out very well. The process of leaving your familiar environment and going somewhere to do just the book really focuses you. For example, I did *Parallel* down at Nexus in Atlanta with Michael Goodman, and it was great! No one was on the phone. What usually takes six months, I did in a few weeks!

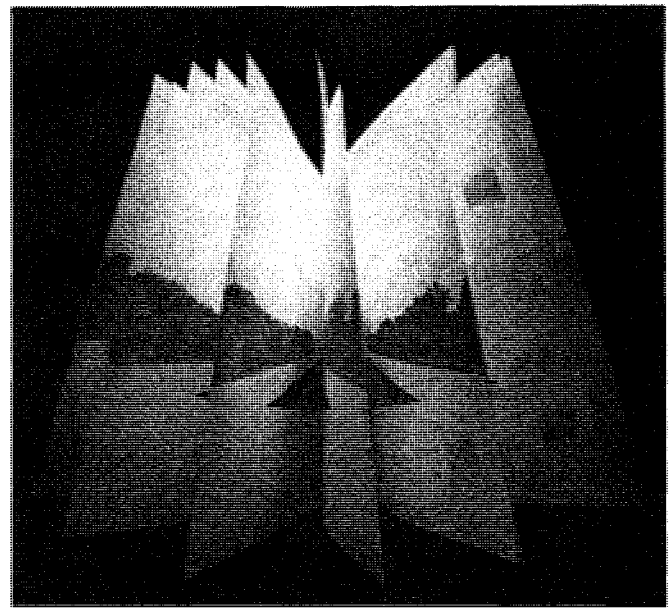
You mentioned Nexus. Obviously, though you are in Maryland, you know of other centers which do similar work to yours?
Yes, Open Studio in Rhinebeck, New York; Chicago Books in New York City; Women's Graphic Center in Los Angeles; Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester; and Coach House Press in Toronto. I recommend all of them highly.

Don't you find the artists extremely nervous, scared out of their minds?
Yes, you're nervous, you're on the line, you're right there. It's happening, you've thought about it and now it's running on the press. You've planned it and there it is. The ink hits the paper. Is it what you wanted? Less or more? Can you work with it? What will come next? You can do printing so right that there's no risk. I want to see my press runs either soar up or go down in flames. Right on the edge of what the equipment can do.

And again, the option of the Center is that if you don't like what you see, you can pull the plate, and go back. In fact when I did *Real Lush*, I had a piece of grid paper 10 feet long with the signatures numbered on the top and each press run numbered down the side just to keep track of the changes I was making during the actual press work. I would run some different signatures with one plate, divide them up and then run another collection with a different plate. I would pencil in on the grid as I went. And I had to close off certain signatures with a broad "X", because my overriding response was to saturate everything with ink.

So in a strange way you were creating and re-creating new images when you wanted, as long as you had indicated what you had done? And dissatisfaction or satisfaction created a new image at times?
Exactly. Like painting with the press.

The press becomes a new medium. Are there people who get hooked?
Yes, but I don't think all artists are going to do artists' books. It takes a certain mentality to go through that type of delayed gratification, that type of complexity in order to arrive at a multiple—not a unique object but a multiple to be distributed to many people. The number of copies expands the audience, but because of the production it *can* compress the statement. We do everything we can to loosen it up at the Center.



REPRO MEMENTO, 1980

Coming into the print medium must be extraordinary for some people. There's no school (technical or polytechnical) that prepares this kind of education, is there?
Well, schools like Visual Studies Workshop, Art Institute of Chicago and Tyler offer programs. Most print centers have an educational dimension. You learn by doing. The environment to experiment is critical. At the Center we try to streamline the process for the so-called non-technical person. Rulers create all kinds of problems. We try and create a situation where there are no rulers existing in printing. We try to clear out as much of the tight printing attitude as possible. Basically by structuring the book first and then filling it is based on the frame of the page, not the singular image or word.

Most artists who work with us come down for a day, print some stuff and then go away for four months. They may come back and take a few workshops: hands-on offset, phototypeset, artists' books, etc. Then they are ready to schedule and boom! the book is done in two weeks! Or they will print a few plates and then come back a month later and overlay some more. That takes longer but is richer.

I've noticed more books being produced which require participation on the part of the viewer, with a play between the construct and the paper, different from the straight-on book format.
Yes, that's exciting. The book in the West is out of the Codex tradition for various material, manufacturing and then cultural reasons. My wife, Anne-Catherine Fallen, has done a number of studies of book structures from early Coptic formats to palm leaf books from Southeast Asia and India. They are all different from our own traditions, but are still containers of information. They are very active and it is very exciting to explore with them.

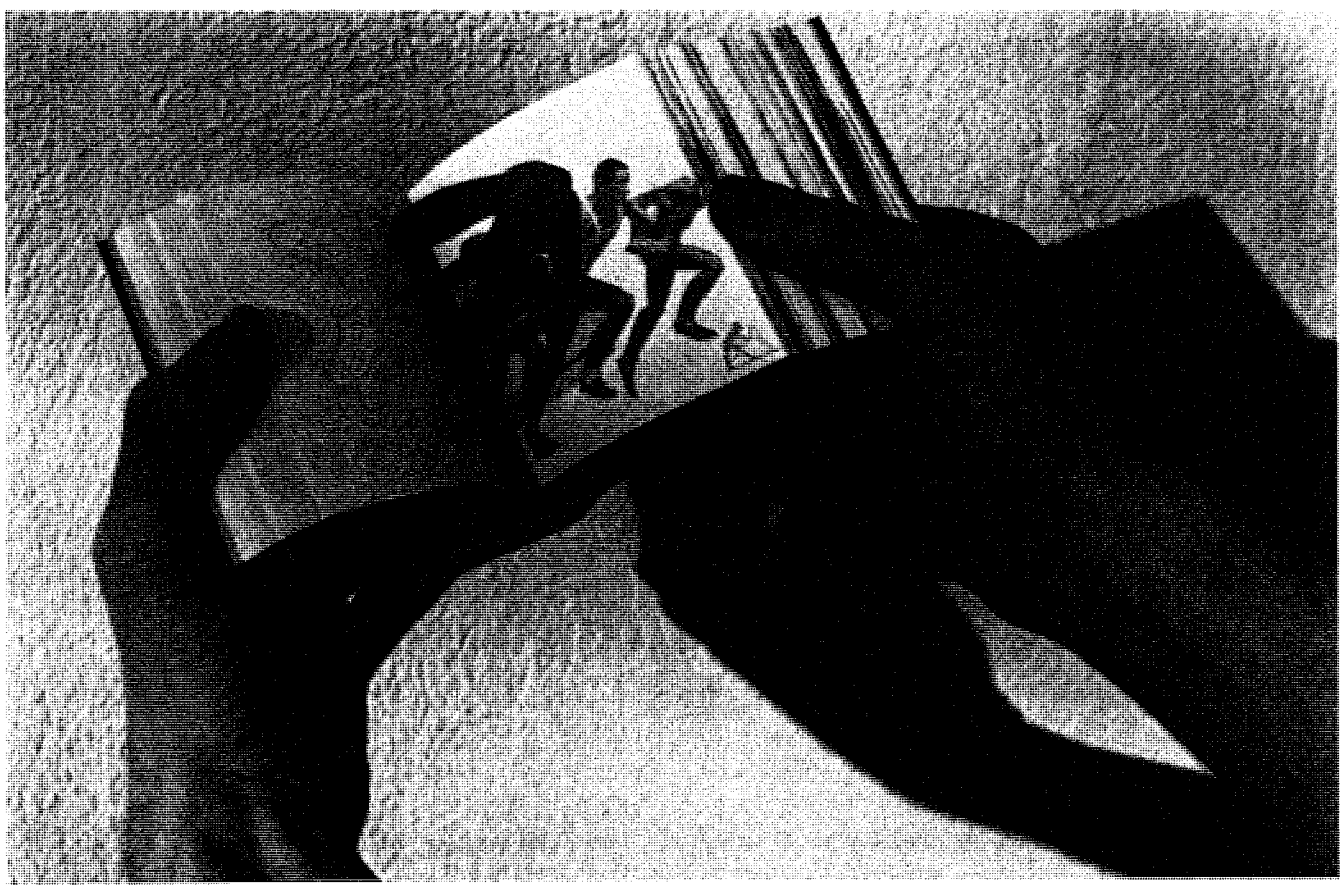
Then that experimentation with book formats which is accessible at the Writer's Center is quite different from the experience at any ordinary printshop which understands only the codex tradition?
Yes, it's different manufacturing and a different audience. What I tell artists who come to the Center is that anything is possible. Whatever you want to do you can do, and we can produce it with you. The other thing I tell them is that we charge extra for black ink. I hate printing with black ink.

How do you find time to do your own books?
I have a schedule set up, so that certain days I'm not at the Center. I work then. You have to be disciplined. And when you are in the midst of a new book, as I am right now, everything else stops and you go flat out till you finish.

I have a question about your books and their relationship to symmetry. You like angles. I just wonder where that interest came from, since you don't seem to have a crick in your neck? You have a definite look about your books.
Up to 1977 most of my printed books were codex. I wanted to make my books more dimensional. Alert the viewer that there might be a different experience awaiting him. Make it real clear at the beginning. Peak their curiosity, "why is this? where is this going?". With *Real Lush*, for example, the angle binding was intentional both to help flip open the book, but also to hide a good percentage of the book in the spine. Open and close. Some people press the book attempting to make it square. Others will respond immediately, and let the pages fly back and forth.

How do you go about making a book?
I usually come up with a structure first, so that the frame of the experience is the frame of the book. And then I work in from there. With *Repro Memento* I came up with the structure about two years before I actually printed the book. With *Parallel* the structure was right there and then I worked it out in a very short time. It's a process of seeing something on the street or perhaps a combination of papers that sparks my attention. A jog to my memory. Then I start working with the papers and seeing if the spark, the pull, the job will structure out. I gradually dig deeper and deeper and then I have to dig out, which is the hard part. But making the structure at the initial stage is when I feel closest to the viewer.

So you're going through that intimate relationship between the viewer and your product almost before you're going to produce it. Isn't that unusual?
Well, the process of coming up with the structure is like establishing a bridge with the viewer. This is what we're going to talk with, this is the frame, this is the context to explore. It's also what I talk with. I work back and forth from content to form. Frequently changing the structure, looking for openings. *Real Lush* did not start out as an angle book. The angle did not come in for about three months, but that step opened up a dialogue with the form and then the imagined viewer. That was vital. The feelings and ideas are there, and they surface in the structure.



REAL LUSH, 1981

Talking about dialogue, your *Repro Memento*, for instance, allows the participant with the book to discover, almost uncover, your intentions, by the transparency of the paper, by the structure, which became a piece of sculpture at times, so that unlocking the secrets of the book was as much part of the activity as in fact really knowing what the book was all about—a memory tract, a moment extracted from the printing. Your books often unlock those secrets slowly, almost as much as the pain and suffering of making those books.
Cover and uncover, then the element of surprise. You recognize something in the book over time. The book hits you over time.

What are you working on now?
The new book, *Vectors* (working title), which will be coming out this spring, is composed of drawing and words on 12 different colors of paper in 15 colors of ink. It's book active. A very narrow format, 2 x 19 inches. It spins off a common axis and fans into arcs and circles. Closed, it's tied up with ribbon. Open, it rainbows. There's slow process of revealing and concealing.

Do you have any definition of artists' books?
Only that it is bound. Once you've tied together something: paper, oranges, concrete, whatever, it implies coherence. Implies that you've thought about it. Implies that you've done something which is basically human: combine two or more things together to create a relationship. A book has that automatic manifold implication because of its binding. The viewer anticipates he will have to work the binding to discover the contents—even in a codex. By the *way* you bring together the pages, you shape the circumstances.

The binding then is the commitment?
Yes, that is a good way to put it. You see the binding first in a book, as it lies closed on a shelf. Compressed almost waiting to explode. The book triggers a feeling in you. You are attracted to this book. You reach for it. (the commitment). You open the book and you open yourself. You begin a dialogue with the movement of the pages. You are aware of remembering. You cover, uncover bound shapes. You reveal and conceal.

And that's an intimate experience, a one-to-one experience with magic?
Yes, the intimate magic of bringing forth memory.

Kevin Osborn's books are described in a free brochure and are available from: OsbornBook, P.O. Box 11147, Arlington, Virginia 22210.

The Writer's Center is a non-profit membership organization of over 1,300 writers, editors, small press publishers, and graphic artists whose goal is to help the general public participate in the creation, distribution, and enjoyment of literature and the graphic arts. The Center is located at 4800 Sangamore Road, Bethesda, Maryland 20816. (301)229-0930. Call or write for more information.