

# GUTTER CROSSING ON EMILY McVARISH

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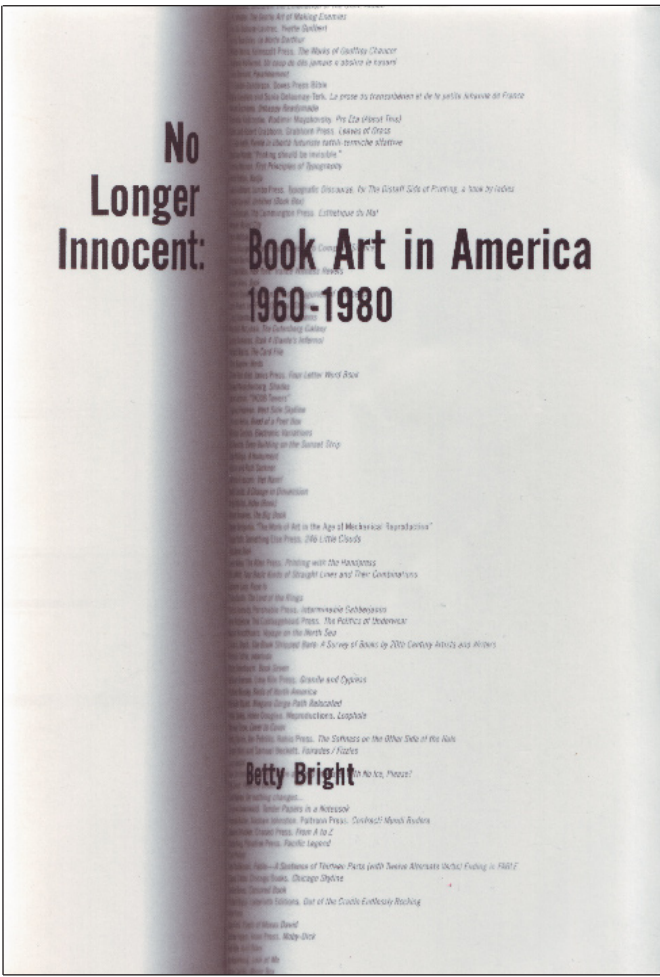
The San Francisco Bay Area has been a hotbed for innovative fine press publishing, poetry and artists' books for at least a century. Gelett Burgess' bohemian journal *The Lark*, an antecedent for its magical counterpoint *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, was printed on scraps of wallpaper and cut into a trapezoid. The covers were graced with spoof woodcuts in the style of Aubrey Beardsley, while the frenetic mirage of satirical texts and illustrations within attempted to rock the "bromides" (the conservative bourgeois) that Burgess and his young cohorts reviled. Three of America's best fine presses of the 1920s, including Taylor and Taylor, John Henry Nash and the Grabhorn brothers were also based in San Francisco. From 1944 to 1948, another Porter (the found-language poet pioneer Bern Porter) and George Leite co-published *Circle*, and in 1946, Porter published Kenneth Patchen's *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* in a typographically adventurous trade and unique hand-painted edition. In the years following the Second World War, a group of artists met at a camp for conscientious objectors in Waldport, Oregon and formed the Untide Press, which included maverick printers William Everson and Adrian Wilson. The ensemble disbanded at the end of the War after they collaborated on their most sophisticated book, Patchen's *An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air*, which brought Paul Renner's anti-fascist Futura into dialogue with the pacifist poetry and politics of the time.

The end of World War II signaled a radical shift in the art of the book and commercial printing technologies, and this transformation was embodied by the New American poetry and poetics of the 1950s. Wallace Berman's roving magazine *Semina* (1955-1964), was printed and assembled by hand using an eclectic assemblage of poems and photographs. *Semina* was a refuge for transgressive artists that served as a crucial point of reference for a younger generation of aspiring poets, printers and a rare breed of artists working somewhere in between that would, in the mid-1970s, come to be known as "book artists." The individuals who were part of a rejuvenation in Bay Area book art that rivaled the Modernist European Avant-Garde included, but were by no means limited to: Dave Haselwood (Auerhahn); Graham Mackintosh; Holbrook Teter and Michael Myers (Zephyrus Image); Betsy Davids and Jim Petrillo (Rebis); Frances Butler and Alastair Johnston (Poltrone); Jamie Robles; Kathy Walkup; and Johanna Drucker. I am indebted to Drucker for introducing me to the work of Emily McVarish, one of the most inspiring and accomplished artists of my generation.

When I first encountered McVarish's work, I primarily gravitated towards handmade paper, quality binding, exquisite printing, and above all else, books that featured meaningful, previously unpublished writing. Sumptuous reprints of classics like *Ulysses* and *Moby Dick* didn't interest me (still don't), nor did the new wave of technique-driven virtuoso sculptural books where the text (if any) appeared an afterthought. One afternoon at the Rare

Book School at the University of Virginia in the summer of 2003, Drucker presented me with a small, apparently anonymous, obviously handmade book, comprised of envelopes bound to the spine in place of pages, and asked me for my thoughts. The book baffled me favorably, but I couldn't explain why. I had never seen anything like it. It reminded me of Dickinson's electrifying Master Letters – personal but not private, mediated and mysterious. Each fragile envelope contained what appeared to be a poorly photocopied letter that struck me as some sort of epistolary cut-up. I later learned that this book, *being the letters* (1990), was an early work by McVarish based on Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* produced in an edition of just thirteen copies. Nearly twenty years later, she continues to work with found and procedurally generated texts to produce books and printed objects that destabilize traditional binaries by reminding us that words *are* images, that form *is* content and that conceptual writing and art can continue to live harmoniously in the form of a book long after the heyday of the supposedly democratic multiple. Although her books are always historically informed, they are not retro – her approach is consistently fresh, labor-intensive and rigorous. Masterfully printed by hand, McVarish's works have never exuded the read-me-not preciousness that many handmade books exhibit. Here one finds a cool, unadorned, mechanically polished aesthetic, that has as far as I'm concerned turned the world of letterpress printing on its feet (quite literally).

Letters, words, books, and libraries are of primal importance for most poets (even, or should I say *especially*, those engaged with new media practices), and yet I can think of few writing today whose work is as irrevocably bound to the book as McVarish (master of obsolete media). My tendency is to think inclusively and practically about what qualifies as poetry (artists' books too, for that matter). If a given mode of discourse or vocabulary lends itself to a particular work of art, my preference is to put it to use. McVarish's practice occupies a unique place in a rare constellation of artists whose work stands between poetry and visual art, a horizon where individuals as various as William Blake, Stéphane Mallarmé, Iliazd, Dick Higgins, Raymond Queneau, H.N. Werkman, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Ruth Laxson would commune. Since I'm writing this essay with the notion of contemporaries looming in the background, I would like to dwell for a moment on the questions of where and how one encounters the work. Unlike most of the poets of my generation (or otherwise), McVarish rarely reads her writing aloud, at least not in the usual venues where one goes for a poetry reading. If there is any corre-



lation between her work and that of the Russian Futurists it is conceptual and yet I often wonder how one would read one of her books aloud based on a kindred system of linguistic experiments in sound symbolism. The books perform the reading of the writing, a kind of writing that (take this with a grain of salt) does not lend itself to other modes of publication and distribution as conveniently as poetries whose lexical and semantic values are less contingent on context and the material embodiment of the work itself. That said, I should also point out that one cannot find her books at Small Press Distribution or any of the other usual haunts. It seems as if issues of distribution and availability aren't really issues for McVarish – they are natural extensions of what matters most – the work itself.

McVarish is too young to have been addressed in Betty Bright's *No Longer Innocent*, a recent study of book art in America that covers two rich decades of activity between 1960 and 1980, so I find it particularly interesting that she was asked to design the cover, in essence, to offer an identity to the era of her childhood. At a glance, it appears as if she simply opened a mock-up of Bright's book (or one on a similar subject) to an index, slapped it down on the scanner and sent it off, but upon closer examination this design *incises* some of the recurrent critical paradigms at work in McVarish's poetics, namely presence and absence, clarity and illegibility, and the acute attention she has brought to the gutter for nearly twenty years. Here, the flattened two-dimensional gutter portrays the book as an outside folded in – an immanently political, social, embedded, and in this case indexical history of the book itself. The cover doesn't conceal, it opens, suggesting that the book, any book, is always open (like Duchamp's *Door at 11 rue Larrey*). The page is a dynamic structure in space, not a flat sleepy thing. A gutter is defined by the OED as "the white space between the pages of a book," a "channel forming a receptacle for dirt or filth" and a "shallow trough fixed under the eaves of a roof, or a channel running between two sloping roofs, to carry off the rain-water." In urban architecture, as Kevin Lynch and others have noted, the gutter is one of the most significant, although often discrete, aspects of efficient design. The same is true of the book according to Graham Mackintosh who notes in his brief essay "Mis-en-page," ". . .one of the most annoying aspects of modern trade books is the 'pinching' that goes on in the gutter." In works as various as those designed by William Morris, Jan Tschichold and Ed Ruscha, the gutter (and its absence) is a consciously constructed negative space as integral as the positive.

Opposite:  
Cover of  
Betty Bright's  
*No Longer  
Innocent*,  
*Granary Books*  
(2005).

In McVarish's 'S, printed in an edition of 50 in 2005, the words "MY WILL-HOLD HAS WORN YOU TO A SLIP'S TRANSPARENCY. YOU WHISTLE ASSURANCES BILLOWING . . ." appear in bluish-gray ink printed from sans serif type (the hyphen is red). The text runs like a strip of tickertape that begins on the third from final page of the book with the letter "M." These two sentences read backwards (much in the way that a printer must learn to read letterforms). Printed from woodtype, the backwards sentence was, according to McVarish, "printed on another sheet and then off-set on the sheet used in the book – hence the reversal. (I had two presses set up: one with the wood type and one with a large linoleum block that I used for pressure to transfer the ink from the printed sheet onto another.) In order to make sense of the text as it appears above, the reader must turn the pages from back to front, holding the reversed word-fragments in mind as they traverse the book's gutter, jumping from one page to the next. The fragments accumulate, forming words, and from the words, a line like a contingent spark that requires seeing, reading and meaning to ignite. To make sense of the line as such challenges my habitual attentions as a reader, as if I was deciphering a language I did not understand. Here are the same two sentences. I have substituted line-breaks for page-breaks.

M  
Y WIL  
L – HOL  
D HAS



WORN  
 YOU T  
 O A S  
 LIP'S  
 TRAN  
 SPARE  
 NCY. Y  
 OU WH  
 ISTLE  
 ASSUR  
 ANCES  
 BILLO  
 WING . . .

Although this arrangement has done momentary harm to McVarish's art, I have presented the text in this fashion only to show how her textual severing, syntactical scrambling and obfuscation of the word could be aligned with minimalist and conceptual poets like Aram Saroyan and Vito Acconci, as well as formal experiments in composition attributed to New York School and Language poets. The second major element at work in this book is the line that reads front to back, right to left in red sans serif letters of the same point size:

BE ST  
 ILL F  
 OR ME.  
 NOTH  
 ING I  
 S WHO  
 LE BU  
 T YOU  
 AS FA  
 R AS

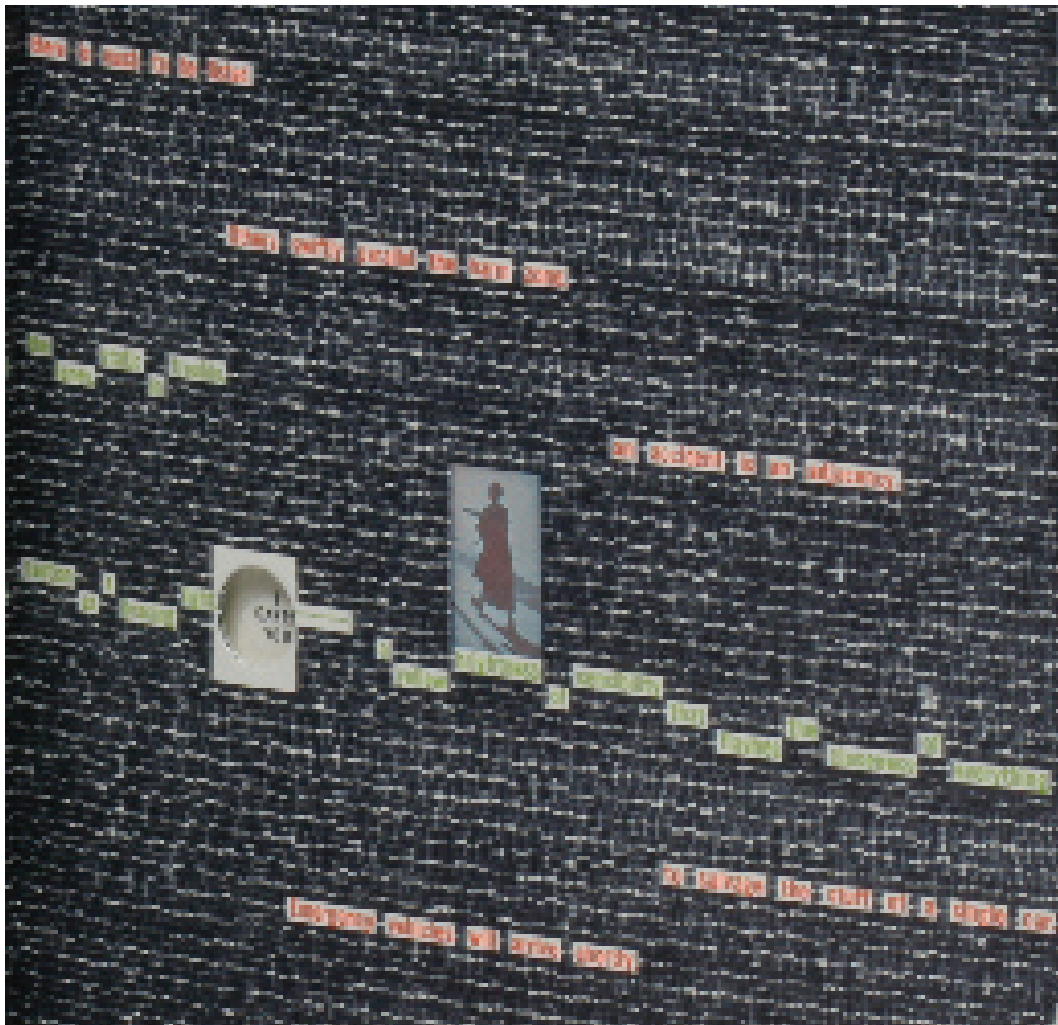
THE E  
YE CA  
N SEE.

These two lines are just a hairline apart, regularized by the use of capitals with a consistent x-height (lower-case letters usually have ascenders and descenders). A third element is introduced: in tiny sans serif, irregularly woven into the white space between the letters that form the upper-line of text, the phrases "Behind the wheel," "a driver merges" "with the drive" "and the outcome's" "transparency" (next page-spread) "Homecoming, home," "sitting, and seat" "converge in the pull" "of a thousand" "tacit purposes" (next page-spread) "that shoot" "and lodge" "untouched." The fourth primary element is a photograph that has been split in half, creating something akin to a running photographic header and footer, the former a street-level snapshot of traffic, the latter a city skyscraper scene. I want to underscore at least three of the cyclical forces generated in this book: text, text as image, and the constraint imposed on both by the opaque divisions of the book. 'S happens to be a sewn pamphlet, and yet this unassuming form subverts the desire to read complacently by exposing an intricate, almost infinite, array of approaches. In an interview conducted by Lytle Shaw, McVarish states, "The ways in which these relations may be ambiguous are unlimited, but the expectation of a certain intended meaning behind every compositional decision persists, if only because between the oldest rules [style, size, or color of characters, composition of lines, etc.] and those more recently established in the field of graphic design conventions of reading exist on every typographical level, and this expectation of intent may be infinitely engaged."

Opposite: 'S  
(2005)

Books are one of the most ordinary forms of art: a book of matches, a telephone book, an address book, etc., each a representative form of address. *The Man Walking* presents a combinatory bookscape/cityscape wherein the double-literal floating signifier, in this case, a dapper businessman cast in a porous pop-inspired dark red hue embarks on a Situationist-inspired *dérive*. Alphabetic tabs line the face of the book, and behind each tab, a word. In the first spread, let's call it "spread a," the word "the" is behind "a." Buildings (again) create a pattern of running photographic headers and footers that yield a certain sense of urban chaos within regulated rectangular units. Moving through the architecture of the city and the architecture of the book simultaneously, the relationship between text and image changes; perspective shifts in alarming and unsettling ways as the narrative progresses and digresses in this exquisite labyrinthine drift. *The Man Walking* is a guide-book, map, an unusual directory that is also the subject it directs. It concludes with this cascading line, justified left:

The  
views  
afforded  
by  
evenly  
spaced  
windows  
now  
indiscrete  
may  
seem  
a  
film,  
and  
the  
street,



its  
tireless  
projector.

Temporality, mechanical reproduction, scale, and montage are just a few of the themes that Vertov's classic *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) shares with *Was Here* (2001). The epigraph, under the scrutiny of a gigantic stooped silhouette of a man leaning into the foredge says: "Now, let us see / what the still holds / in store for us . . ." On the title-page the same figure in the same place on the page in duotone (black and greenish-gray) examines the bold red caps that claim: "EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES" (cut to verso) "HAS A HOLE PUNCHED IN IT." In this world, windows are images and images are windows and what may in a given instant appear translucent may in the next become opaque – a lens, a mirror, an eye. Three images of people walking down a city street through memory's haze, an antiquated morning fog, a frosted history. These picture-portals situated within the oversized frame of the page drift in a Bergsonian landscape – each an accomplice to a caption. In order to incite a revolutionary value, Walter Benjamin argued that writers must break through the barrier between writing and image and start taking photographs, for the ". . . illiteracy of the future" he prophesized, citing László Moholy-Nagy, "will be ignorance not of reading and writing, but of photography." Interiority and exteriority engage in an awe-inspiring ricochet that transcends the potentially clearly delineated narrative values ascribed to individual subjectivity and ideology. A sophisticated visual and textual inte-

gration in the conception and design of the whole is carried on throughout, creating an indigenous grammar and lexicon that figures in a continuum that includes *Flicker* (2005), the artists' most accomplished work to date. Technically and conceptually, *Flicker* has set a precedent for innovative printing, design and writing for the next century of artists' books. The rich, midnight-purple pages are composed of thousands of pieces of lead type turned upside down and printed as a solid matrix so the feet (not the face) are what comes into contact with the paper yielding a bizarre background medium that resembles television static or bitmapped digital images astonishingly produced by a technology that has existed, with relatively little alteration, for over four hundred years. The text, mostly individual words gleaned from *The New Yorker* and *The Economist*, appears in the non-inked areas where type has been flipped rightside up to show its readable face. The book revisits the themes of the city and the *flâneur*, this time introducing the flicker as a rupture in the bloodlines of media ranging from cinematic perception to radio transmission to the book itself. Early on, McVarish realized that the "page would show the grid that, at every level, underlines letterpress composition" and to "show connections between a quaintly obsolete technology and a screen made up of pixels, those tiny, quantifiable clocks that can take on a value or not but are always in a sense *there* to configure content." This micro-grid also holds isolated wood letters and small duotones printed from polymer plates of digital video stills. As in *Was Here*, McVarish has elaborated on the reversible relationship between presence and absence by complicating relations between negative and positive space and of sequence by using die-cut holes to link images and texts through multiple spreads. The text is a color-coded intersection where buildings, traffic, a pedestrian, and "linguistic bricolage" break – that is, to give pause and deconstruct simultaneously so that, the artist explains, "by the time all the relational levels are perceived, many effects will have been lost, if only by competition (though whatever graphic elements caused them have not actually been effaced, and so will still be there, vying to be seen in the particular – partial – context which gives them their significance) and thus, the idea of an event as *the* event may well have been destroyed."

Opposite: detail from *Flicker*, Granary Books (2005). Below: open page spread.

Special thanks to Steve Clay for sharing his library, and to Emily McVarish for providing these photographs.

