Having Tea with Blake: Self-Publication and the art of Richard Denner

by Belle Randall, poetry editor of Common Knowledge (Duke University)

Richard Denner, poet, founder and sole operator of his own press, D-press, is a maker of beautiful little books. One calls them "little" without condescension because they are chapbooks, of various dimensions, each worthy of contemplation as an object in itself, and also as an example of what can be done by way of self-publication if one is ingenious enough. Denner has made a place for himself as an artist while remaining entirely outside the mainstream—a possibility for which we have few examples. Designed on a computer screen with the aid of a color copier, his dazzling books require no special technique, expense, or equipment. Even as an illustrator Denner tends to favor media—collage, linoleum block—which needn't intimidate the novice, and he steals from others (in line drawing, from Cocteau and Matisse) so unabashedly that theft becomes a resource.

Whatever is dubious about this—self-publication, minimal craft, plagiarism—falls before the authority of the books themselves, with their certitude, vitality, and evident integrity. (To see for yourself, go to the D-press website). The process of making books has become for Denner an integral part of the creative process of writing poems. Denner does not first write the book and then make the cover; the book and its contents are created at the same time. "In the early letter press editions, I wrote some of the poems right in the type case, utilizing the limitations of the size of the type and type case (how much poem can one print in a 4x5 inch area using 60 pt Bodoni bold)? Now that I use a computer, I pour my poems directly into the book using a publisher file, many poems evolving by their placement in series..." Much about Denner's approach recalls another artist for whom pictorial and poetic ideas were born together in the imagination, William Blake. Blake invented a new method engraving in order to be able to combine it with letter-press printing, unifying the two processes into a single act of creation, as Richard has done with his computer.

Denner's books are revolutionary because they subvert the status quo. Despite the changes commercial publishing has undergone in recent decades (computerization, mega mergers, globalization, the stock market decline), a hierarchy persists, a measure of influence and prestige: at the pinnacle are the major publishing houses, such as W.W. Norton, which publishes Shamus Heaney, and Random House, Billy Collins. Such publication promises wide distribution, reviews, readings, television interviews and book signings. It bestows fame, which, for a poet can be everything. Just beneath publishing by a major house, rivaling it, comes publication by one of the distinguished literary presses like New Directions or Copper Canyon. This has some advantages: the book is apt to be kept in print longer, the poet treated with greater respect. Beneath this, or again, rivaling it, come the best of the university presses, then the small "art" presses, those that produce collector-quality letterpress chapbooks in limited editions; and, beneath these, like bottom

fish, those numerous tacky small presses that come and go and on the local scene, generated by political or social agency ("Poems for the Homeless," "Poems by Battered Women"), and beneath this, or blending with it, the more recent phenomenon—print to order books—whose presence is changing the landscape of book publishing, permitting the writer to "launder" self-publication and enabling him to afford it. For a fee, Xlibris, or any of an increasing number of print-on-demand companies will publish your book, and add Amazon.com will it to their list. You can select the name of your press and contribute a photo for the cover. Because, as the term "print-on-demand" implies, your book is printed only when it is requested, no further expenditure is required. How will anyone know that your book is essentially a vanity publication? Most print to order books are immediately recognizable by their nerdy generic designs, boxy edges (the pages and cover cut in one fell swoop), stapled centerfolds, and so on. Richard's books, in contrast, have been displayed at the Berkeley Art Museum, and praised in "Temple," whose editor Charles Potts has gone so far as to declare Denner a "great poet." But for all the admiration Denner's books have garnered, in the world of mainstream publishing they remain invisible because they are self-publications. (I am talking here about print publication. The Internet is a world too vast and lacking in boundaries for anyone to have an overview of its offerings, thus it too remains largely unsorted and outside the hierarchy. It is a supremely democratic realm, and one where, not surprisingly, Richard's poems—which appear on close to 50 websites—are at home).

There are of course good reasons to be wary of self-publication. When I suggest it as an option to the students in my poetry writing class in the university extension program, mostly middle-aged adults who have been closet writers for years and are starved for recognition, many disdain it. Like me, they are from a generation for whom self-promotion was different from acclaim. We yearn for a book because a book proves that our work has value to someone else—a gratification self-publication cannot provide.

Nevertheless, self-publication has its place. It is a way of bringing a group of poems to completion, and, as a practical matter, of getting them to that circle of friends, acquaintances and admired writers, who may, for the poet, constitute the most important audience. The books will not find wide distribution, but they may be offered for sale at public readings, or, if you are like me, given away, at some expense to the poet, to desired readers. As Richard's books clearly demonstrate, self-publication rises above "vanity press" when it is fully justified by its art. As such, it has a hollowed tradition.

Yet whatever beauty Richard's chapbooks have, the establishment cannot see, because it does not fit into established categories. Most museum quality chapbooks are done on a letterpress, an obsolete piece of equipment operated by turning a wheel as tall as your armpit while pumping a treadle sufficiently heavy to make a man's leg ache; type setting by hand is an arduous journey, requiring skill, patience and practice in the deliberate placement of every letter of every word. Devotees of this craft are the least likely to be able to appreciate Richard's work, because it takes shortcuts, but they need to look again. Most small presses, if they become at all successful, resort

to newer technology of necessity, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Too ornate a frame can overwhelm a picture, and the letterpress chapbook with its richness of paper, fastidious craft and inherent old-fashionedness, can overwhelm contemporary poems if the voice is casual and unassuming, as is Richard's.

Improvisation, spontaneity, discovery—the values of Richard's poetry and art reflect his lifelong devotion to the practice of Buddhist meditation (the explicit subject of at least one of his books, Songs of Jampa Dorje). Richard's is an art that is entirely willing to throw itself away. The impulse out of which his books arise is one of joyful play. As objects, they seem almost disposable. They are not made of fine paper; they don't ask to be saved forever and then get mislaid in the Sunday Times, as fine chapbooks are apt to do. The continuous practice of ego-annihilation gives rise to much of Richard's humor. Having leapt headlong into the river of time, Richard is prolific. His output—outpouring, really—is overwhelming evidence of his creativity. D-press has published nearly a hundred books in its thirty years of operation. Season after season, for years I have been the grateful recipient of box loads of books created by Richard, some his own poems, some the poems of others, some designed by Richard alone, some in collaboration, all manifesting the same unerring sense of color and composition that makes his little books wonders of graphic design. Any disdain one might feel for so-called vanity press publication dissolves before the realized beauty of these books.

Publication by a major publishing house may bestow prestige and influence, but these are not, after all, ultimate values for the poet. Such publication does not guarantee the quality of the poetry, nor even, for that matter, wide distribution. There are plenty of horror stories of books published by major houses never to see the light of day; the late Henri Colette's second book won the Lamont, yet was shredded before distribution. The finest small presses produce books with a charm compared to which mainstream publication looks somewhat crass. A poet might prefer the elegance of small press publication for a particular group of poems, or prefer it because it afforded the opportunity of working closely with a friend. Poets who have the option usually publish in a variety of ways.

But even if one overcomes a prejudice against self-publication, the fact remains that self-publication and print-on-demand books have no path to mainstream distribution. Anyway you launder it, self-publication hits a glass ceiling. The poet may list his book with Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble, but will win no contests, receive no mainstream reviews. A poet like Denner, for whom the design and the cover of the book are an integral part of its creation, is working outside the mainstream in a way that all but assures his neglect, and this is true, even though the reception his poems have received "on line" suggests his work's appeal. No contest will accept a self-published book (indeed, publication is their reward); no mainstream critic will assess it. From the point of view of the status quo, Richard's books don't exist.

One of the most subversive aspect of Denner's work is what I will call his forgeries. Denner's art is extremely derivative and he knows it. One of his books—a long poem in tribute to Allen

Ginsberg—is designed to look like the early City Lights editions, of which Howl is an example; another, a translation of one of Richard's books into French (a computer translation one wonders?), looks exactly like one of those plainly jacketed paperbacks one finds in the foreign language section of the book store. And am I just imagining it or is Richard's *Collected Poems: 1961-2000* (Comrades Press, England) designed to look like a New Directions book? This amuses me greatly. I have envied poets who are published by New Directions. Richard shows me how I might grant my own wish. Derivativeness becomes part of Richard's amplitude. The impulse to copy calumniates, in Richard's work, in *Another Artaud*, a book which is the mirror image of the City Light *Artaud Anthology* published in the early Sixties and edited by Jack Hirschman. As John Bennett declares on the back cover, "If one leafs through the pages of Another Artaud, the visual and structural similarities hold, and if one goes no further, a conclusion might be reached that a rather clever thing has been done. But if one delves into the writing itself, distinctions blur, and one Artaud bleeds into the other."

Richard's acts of theft are revolutionary, for they show us how we may both co-opt and subvert icons of mainstream success. To copy the appearance of other books is an idea whose applications are endless. Using the color copier available at my local copy store and a software program called "booklet," I was able to imitate Richard's books, for example, and the point is, you could too. I created a chapbook of my own poems and another by the poet Charlie Burks. The books I made were displayed and sold by our local poetry bookstore, which for me was enough to make them real. Richard's books are revolutionary and liberating. They delight in their own existence and invite others to do the same. "All of this is available to us all," they seem to say: we need not sit around and wait to be published, we need not "submit" to the remote, judging eye of editors. In order to justify self-publication we need only make books that are truly beautiful.

"Blake had tea with me in the garden/ behind Willow Wood Market," Richard claims in one poem ("Worn to a Phrasl"); a postscript to the poem adds, "The sun was high in the heavens at mid-second light while we talked and drunk our Wuli Oolong. The day was a cup of poetry."