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Outside In

An expanded conversation regarding the opening of Oraibi + Beckbooks in Geneva

Corinn Gerber

«Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye.» So begins Michael Warner's introduction to his book *Publics and Counterpublics*. This article looks closer at the emancipatory potential of publics. It does so on the occasion of the opening of ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS in Geneva.





The other night, there was a group exhibition opening at 6820 rue Marconi in Montréal, a new space that opened recently. It is one of these huge, leftover industrial loft spaces that New Yorkers and Torontonians get nostalgic about, and whose affordability might come from the fact that it has no in-built heating system. The group exhibition took place around a partially disassembled car at the far end of the space. Visitors entering at the front end were welcomed by a number of publications distributed over four concrete blocks reminiscent of brutalist architecture, surrounded by an approximately equal number of records on display in custom-built shelves connecting the floor of the space to its ceiling. The publications range from Canadian neo-classics such as Fillip Magazine through recent architecture and urbanism flashlights such as San Rocco Magazine to straight-up contemporary art catalogues and monographs such as the one by Pamela Rosenkranz published by JRP-Ringier. Colin, who was in charge of the bar that night, told me about a new «governance» structure that has just been put in place for the collective that runs the space: each member of the collective is now entitled Co-Director. This shall soon be reflected on their respective business cards. The name of the Co-Director responsible for the publications is Madeleine (Haines Paré). She explained to me how she chose to carry fewer titles, not only due to financial restraints, but also because that way she can invest more effort into direct conversations with publishers.

BECKBOOKS emerged in 2012 in Zurich as a part of AP News. AP News was a cinema space co-organized by a group of Zurich-based artists and art historians in Wipkingen. In the midst of AP News, BECKBOOKS was initiated and run entirely by Géraldine Beck. Prior to this and for one year after moving to Zurich, Géraldine managed the Motto Bookshop at Corner College, located at Perla-Mode on Long Street and later on at Kochstrasse in Kreis 3. Motto Books/Motto Distribution was founded by Alexis Zavialoff, sole owner of the business. In 2012, Géraldine took on the distribution at Edition Patrick Frey of eponymous ownership, where she worked for about two years before moving back to Geneva. I personally encountered BECKBOOKS virtually at first. Somehow I ended up on their mailing list, and regularly received e-news about new stock additions that were outstanding and convincing in their singular combination of curatorial precision and personal passion. One of the first of those newsletters contained Printed Matter Co-Founder Lucy Lippard's *From the Center*.

Géraldine Beck describes BECKBOOKS' transition to a seemingly more ephemeral form of functioning:

> «When we decided to close the cinema [ed. AP News], I moved the books to my studio and created the web-shop to avoid them getting stuck and damaged in banana boxes. I knew quite precisely what I wanted so it didn't take long, and it became a very handy platform in terms of visibility as well.»

For the past three years, BECKBOOKS has existed as an online catalogue [http://www.beckbooks.ch/], and temporarily took on the form of a physical shop on various occasions, during book fairs or small events, such as in the form of a Christmas sale at Francesca Pia Gallery in Zurich, a book launch at Marbriers 4 in Geneva, a collaboration with TG in Nottingham, or an improvised sale at Géraldine Beck's house. It also created new formats such as BOOK TV [http://www.booktv.ch/], a web-series recorded in public at various places in Switzerland. BOOK TV aims to showcase rarely seen art-related publications presented by a specialist (artists, theoreticians, readers, aficionados or collectors, all book lovers). During these presentations, the presenters guide through the printed materials laid out on a table in front of them while a camera directly films this material from above. This image is projected on a wall behind the presenters during the event and streamed online after. When asked why she decided to make the shop stable again after it was more of a pop-up for a while, Géraldine replies:

> «I wouldn't really say it functioned as a pop-up, rather that for a while it didn't have a public space, and that sometimes I felt the need to talk to people about books instead of going to the post office to send out orders. After closing the bookshop at AP News, I always knew I would end up re-opening officially somewhere.»

Inside Out

Perla-Mode and AP News in Zurich, and rue Marconi in Montréal, have one thing in common: Both situated a bookshop at their entrance that welcomes visitors first and at all opening times. It is from the publications in these shops that much of the public programming of those spaces emerges – contacts are made, information is exchanged, spaces get connected and physical meetings arranged.

Books make publics. A prominent articulation of this phenomenon is found in Publication Studio's (which was co-founded by Patricia No and Matthew Stadler) infamous mantra [http://www.publicationstudio.biz/about/] of 2009: «This public, which is more than a market, is created through physical production, digital circulation, and social gathering. Together these construct a space of conversation, which beckons a public into being.» That's not actually news however. Stefan Germer and Isabelle Graw, co-founders of *Texte zur Kunst* magazine, note in the editorial of their pilot issue #1 in 1990: «We have been asked again and again the question of the ‹target audience.› No target audience analysis can deceive us about the fact that it addresses a fictitious number that only exists in survey results. In any work that addresses an audience, this audience is being created. We are assuming an imaginary audience that can turn into a real one.» As publishers, both Publication Studio by attending to the «Social Life of the Book,» and *Texte zur Kunst* using imagination, do not deliver information to a public, but produce this public through the act of publication and its materialization itself. When circulating, the publication that is providing a space on its inside, on its pages, enters

into conversation with other publications, and opens up further spaces through readings, gatherings, discussions, critiques, launches.

The public that this space makes is in the public that BECKBOOKS makes is in the public that AP News makes. And yet there is another public that all of these three publics together find themselves in: the public of the city of Zurich and the public of the state of Switzerland, or the public of Europe and maybe that of the world and the universe. We could add to this *the public* of Facebook or the Internet. A clear definition of *the public* is neither available nor desirable. Jürgen Habermas coins «the public sphere,» [1] while Michael Warner finds «a kind of social totality.» On the first two pages of her critique of Habermas' concept Nancy Fraser undertakes the fundamental situation of «the public sphere» as clearly discursive [2]. Warner further differentiates the diverse a *publics* into those that emerge from all the people being physically present in a particular room at one time (such as in a bookshop during a reading), and those that group around discourse (everyone that reads a particular book, be they regulars of AP News or Beck Books or passing-by citizens of Zurich or Geneva, or both at the same time).

However, let's be clear about one thing: that there are many publics on the one hand, and on the other hand only one. With rue Marconi, Perla Moda and AP News, and with Publication Studio and Texte zur Kunst, we have seen how one is in the other and not opposed to it, and how the inside not only affects the outside, but evokes and transforms it by means of addressing it. *From the Center*.

Theories addressing the *a publics* lean towards an at least moderate romanticism when it comes to the spaces that enable them. From Nancy Fraser's «U.S. feminist subaltern counter-public,» with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places, to Warner's «self-organizing poetic discourse» and Jean-Luc Nancy's «Commerce of Thinking,» spaces similar to the ones described above are being praised enthusiastically, without asking the question who is running them and how.

Outside In

In a 2010 interview in taz, Stephan Geene mentions that the founding of b_books in 1996 was a result of many Berlin-based projects and their interfaces. According to its website [http://www.b-books.de], b_books currently consists of the 21 plus members of its collective. As such, b_books entertains a publishing house, a film production (bbooksz av film), the discursive format *Montagspraxis*, and a bookstore. Legally, Stephan Geene is or at least was its sole owner.

Some twenty years prior to Texte zur Kunst, FILE Megazine was conceived in Canada by the artists' collective General Idea, and published by Art Official Inc. as a «cross-Canada organ, by artists for artists.» During its editorial processes, many materials were exchanged between artists, within Canada and between Canadian and international artists. Publication here is not the production and circulation of magazines, books, posters or prints only, but a means to materially bridge distances: a wealth of artists' correspondence changing forms within these processes. Resulting from these exchanges was what AA Bronson calls «cultural flotsam.» These editorial processes involved several dozens if not more artists and collectives including Image Bank (also as co-editors), Banal Beauty Inc., Robert Filliou, to name only a few. And it is this flotsam that made up the initial stock of and was sold through Art Metropole, an entity

of the non-profit Art Official Inc., whose initial Board of Directors was made up solely of General Idea, namely AA Bronson (born Michael Tims, Treasurer), Felix Partz (born Ron Gabe, Vice-President), and Jorge Zontal (born George/Jorge Saia, President). Art Official Inc.'s Articles of Incorporation include «the feminine in the masculine,» but not the masculine in the feminine.

«Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye. You can also not easily avoid them.» [3] When it comes to the places that enable those publics, can the same be said of their ownership? *The public* (the universe or the internet) is run by professionals. What does this mean? In her study [4] on professional women in Manitoba, Mary Kinnear traces the emergence of professionalism in modern societies and how, not only in Canada, professional work embodied selfless public service for the common good. Professionals are selected by merit and judged by peers, and their authority is based on expertise. It is this certified merit and witnessed expertise that also allows for greater autonomy. Since they are facilitating the making of publics, are bookshop and magazine owners professionals in service of the greater good? Does calling a business by its owner's name mean that it is peer-proofed? Walther König, Patrick Frey. If we were to follow through with Publication Studio's concept of the shared space of publication, should the roles enabling this space not be articulated alongside its production instead of being assigned by peers?

And what does it then mean to own it, but not to call it by your name? Alexis Zavialoff (Motto Books), Stephan Geene (b_books). Or to govern it under a different name? Michael Tims, Ron Gabe, George Saia (Art Official Inc.). When taking a closer look at seemingly collective ownership structures – and this same analysis can be undertaken for many more than the few examples that this article allows space for –, they can turn into their opposite, or at least they create insiders and outsiders of the structure, or of the public they make. This has to do with the fact that *the public* and a *public* coincide in this question. *The public* is governed by public law. At the moment when one of the a publics is legalized as an entity of *the public*, the two meet. And one of the results of this encounter is names. But compared to the inside-out movement between the different publics that we observed before, this movement takes the other direction, from the outside to the inside. Could this direction of movement also lead to a transformation, in a similar way to the inside-out trajectory?

Tiphanie Blanc and Ramaya Tegegne started ORAIBI in 2013. Ramaya Tegegne is also currently co-running Forde [http://www.forde.ch], an artist-curator-run space in Geneva, and Tiphanie Blanc co-organized the same space 2010-2012. ORAIBI was first conceived as a curatorial project around the book. For each of its temporary set-ups – mostly at independent art spaces – an artist was asked to conceive a display for hosting lectures and a presentation of a selection of books with a special focus. Later, it became increasingly clear that a good art bookshop was missing in Geneva. Always with the idea of closely linking this activity with a program of events, they had been looking for a permanent space for a bookshop for quite a while when Géraldine Beck decided she wanted to move back to Geneva:

> «After having run BECKBOOKS for one year in Zurich, the public reaction was enthusiastic, but I did reach a point where I wasn't sure anymore if I wanted to continue to live there. There was a certain enthusiasm about things in Geneva, I haven't lived there in six years (it's my hometown), and this city clearly needed a bookshop, since there was barely any.»

ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS joined forces and started to look for a space together. A non-profit organization was founded with – according to Tiphanie Blanc – a generic name, a name that refers only to what it is, like «La Librairie.» But that's not all. The bookshop quite literally

operates with the three founders as partners. Both ORAIBI and BECK BOOKS bring in their own stock of books:

> «It’s quite a bit of accounting at the end of each month, but it works out. There’s not a clearly visible separation in the bookshop, everything is mixed, but we kept the two names because we thought that to highlight the union was quite rich, and because it allows us to undertake projects freely under our respective names.» (GB)

What if we instead start to understand this ownership, the name itself, not as a public, but as a space to be made and inhabited? If we acknowledge the ways in which a public is always a part of another, how could autonomy be a priori to or the goal of such an undertaking? That we need to start to talk about names instead of titles (Co-Directors as in the case of rue Marconi or other) seems clear. But apparently not even pseudonyms such as in the case of Art Official Inc. enable a real share in an ownership.

This is where ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS appears like a response, or as a highly advanced version of an answer, be it conscious or not: For ORAIBI and BECK BOOKS, to keep their names allows for a union. To separate means to be able to share. To act under their respective names means to make space for new practices and forms of making publics, and for letting the outside in. To be a collective means to care about each other and about one’s self.

Epilogue as introduction:

ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS opened on September 17, 2015.

The main focus is on art publications of all types (artists’ books, catalogues, theory, criticism) from the second half of the 20th century onwards with a focus on publications as a medium for art practice and discourse. They are also open to other disciplines such as literature, philosophy, cultural studies, poetry, etc. They carry both new and second hand books, coming from many different sources, as well as hard-to find items including books by themselves and their friends. Recent additions to the stock include: the novels published by Metronome Press in 2005-2006, a well-known and sought-after Paul Thek catalogue from 1973, a bunch of freshly published artists’ books from various young Swiss artists: Miriam Laura Leonardi, Tiphanie Mall, Marta Riniker-Radich, Tina Braegger; the French translation of Silvia Federici’s must-read book *Caliban et la sorcière (Caliban and the Witch)*.

On October 1st, they hosted their first event in the space, the recording of a new episode of BOOK TV with Lili Reynaud-Dewar. She talked about her current research and showed some books related to several projects she’s been leading around AIDS and its related debates and issues such as bareback culture, vulnerability, risk, sex and crises, with a particular interest in figures like the French writer Guillaume Dustan or the Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard. In the future, ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS would also like to host small shows, conferences, movie nights, and more. They will produce a series of artists’ editions. BECKBOOKS is starting its own publishing project, focusing on textbooks.

ORAIBI + BECKBOOKS
c/o Le Rameau d'Or
17 bvd Georges-Favon
1204 Genève, Switzerland
http://oraibibeckbooks.ch/ [http://oraibibeckbooks.ch/]

[1] Habermas, Jürgen. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962.

[2] «The idea of the ‹public sphere› in Habermas's sense is a conceptual resource (…). It designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.» Fraser, Nancy. «Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy». In *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

[3] Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics.* New York: Zone Books, 2002.

[4] Kinnear, Mary. «Professions, Evidence, and Gender in General». In *Subordination. Professional Women 1870-1970.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1995, 3-29.

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