



# THE PROJET MOBILIVRE-BOOKMOBILE PROJECT COLLECTION

JON DAVIES

Selections from the touring  
collection, 2001

After traveling to venues across North America, the hundreds of zines, artists’ books, and other independently published material curated for the projet MOBILIVRE-BOOKMOBILE project migrated each year from their iconic Airstream trailer to Artexte, a visual art documentation centre in downtown Montréal.<sup>1</sup> In addition to scores of periodicals and printed matter related to the field of contemporary art, Artexte houses special collections, of which the BOOKMOBILE project’s substantial archive, spanning their five years of touring activity, is among the largest. The collection comprises 600 publications, which juries chose annually from roughly 3000 submissions in total.

As someone who served on the first BOOKMOBILE jury and followed the project throughout its run from 2001 to 2005, I found that opening up the transparent plastic tubs that now house the collection was like dropping in on old friends inhabiting a particularly spotless nursing home. I was immediately struck by how the collection evidenced the historical specificity of the project’s emergence. The early 2000s were a time when the internet was quickly becoming dominant, but print culture was not yet threatened with obsolescence—in fact, independent publishing was going through a boom of production and readership. While the internet was increasingly a venue for the confessional, social media had yet to be born and bring along its major transformation of how people share their lives and art. Facebook and YouTube emerged in the last two years of BOOKMOBILE’s activity and only exploded in use well after the project’s conclusion. As capitalism loses interest in “obsolescent” forms like 16mm film or the printed page, these media develop a certain auratic value separate from their utility, which artists are consistently drawn to. While independent publishing is still going strong, the BOOKMOBILE collection seems to document a golden age before much of this material, both informational and expressive, migrated online.

As I made my way through the hundreds of publications, which represent an incredible diversity of authors, forms, subjects, and styles, I was most struck by how ideas of access and freedom played out in the collected material and not just in the project’s mandate. The BOOKMOBILE project sought to share independently produced publications among

<sup>1</sup>

Where, ironically, none of the project’s organizers are currently based.

people across North America, and therefore to disseminate and generate knowledge and ideas that visitors otherwise might not have had access to or interest in due to their distance from contemporary artistic discourses or political organizing. The most obvious example of how ideas of access and freedom mark the collection is the inclusion of a substantial body of work by and about prisoners. This material allows inmates’ political positions and creative expression to breach the prison walls and find an audience on the outside, thereby shattering the dehumanizing barriers set up between them and us, inside and outside. Others who rely heavily on independent publishing are queer youth—whose very existence is routinely denied by political, religious, and media leaders—or children in general, whose points of view are marginalized due to systemic ageism. The publications aimed at youth tend to have a liberatory spirit, with many trying to offer kids a way out from their confinement in the school system.

The stops on the BOOKMOBILE tour were chosen to reflect the diverse range of authors that the organizers conscientiously reached out to and included in the collection—but the goal was as much to present people with images and voices of difference as to reflect people’s identities and communities back to them. The host venues included seniors homes, community centres, and public schools, as well as the art galleries, colleges, libraries, and political bookstores that one would expect. In one interview, the organizers admitted that DIY publishing is often seen as exclusively the terrain of middle-class white kids, so they sought to broaden their pool of creators to more accurately reflect the real North America that the trailer would be traveling through.

With its focus on subcultural representation and work by marginalized communities and individuals, the project used the bookmobile format as a kind of moving museum for material that typically traveled by snail mail from creator to reader through a one-to-one relationship. Creating local spaces for public encounters with this material, the BOOKMOBILE created continental networks of geographically disparate individuals and communities. Whether by mail or by vehicle, this dissemination boasts a more slowed-down and meditative pace than the instantaneity of information access and opinion that the internet encourages. The idea of accomplishing the tour in a gas-guzzling old trailer seems positively archaic now, particularly as the internet is supposed to have saved us from the stubborn materiality of the printed page. However, the materiality and tactility of print is what makes the experience of the BOOKMOBILE’s collection so pleasurable: the internet’s flattening of text and images—essentially presenting all content in the same way—has nothing on the idiosyncratic forms here, which include books inside wooden

cases, boxes of tea, underwear, eggshells, and paper dolls (*Dress Me Up Dictators*), as well as one made in the shape of an ice cream sandwich.<sup>2</sup> As one writer noted about the project, visitors were encouraged “to actually pick up and leaf through each work—these books are meant to be handled, read, enjoyed.”<sup>3</sup> Each book therefore accumulates the traces of not only its makers but all of its readers as well, their plastic bags preserving any and all fingerprints, turned corners, smudges, and cracked spines.<sup>4</sup> To pick up and hold one of these books effects a kind of touch between individuals and communities across time and space, one registered on a haptic, intimate level.

One could attempt to draw distinctions between publications that are about disseminating information into the world—e.g., the Prisoners’ HIV/AIDS Support Action Network *Pros and cons: a guide to creating successful community-based HIV/AIDS programs for prisoners* – and those that are more about an individual’s creative expression, such as Whitehorse-based artist Sonja Ahlers’s work. As in the project’s broader interweaving of art and activism, artists’ books in the collection rub shoulders with zines to instigate a category crisis: all independent publishing is included regardless of its apparent aims.<sup>5</sup> This crisis is productive in unexpected ways. Contextualizing a photocopied political pamphlet about class war, for example, with a more traditional artist’s book focuses our attention on how political publishing has developed its own distinct aesthetic forms and styles to effectively convey messages to readers at different moments in history. As zinester and

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Apparently, a book made out of bread had to be rejected, as it wouldn’t have kept for the length of the tour. One of the jury’s selection criteria was structural integrity; the others were the publication’s level of political engagement and its degree of experimentation in terms of form, content, and use of materials/techniques.	Amy Elizabeth and Julie Gerstein, “No More Borders: Canada–U.S. Alliance Promotes Zines & Book Arts Across the Continent” in <i>The Philadelphia Independent</i> , Spring 2002.	I am reminded of the Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg’s 2006 book edition, <i>A Room of One’s Own / A Thousand Libraries</i> , a copy of Virginia Woolf’s 1929 text <i>A Room of One’s Own</i> that compiled every marginal note made by readers in every copy of the book from the Swedish library system. For more information, see <a href="http://kajsadahllberg.com/archiveworks/a-room-of-ones-own--a-thousand-libraries/">kajsadahllberg.com/archiveworks/a-room-of-ones-own--a-thousand-libraries/</a> .	It is worth noting, however, that the organizers were not interested in “uplifting” publications by giving them the hallowed status of a Work of Art.



Pascaline Knight.  
*Possessions*, year unknown

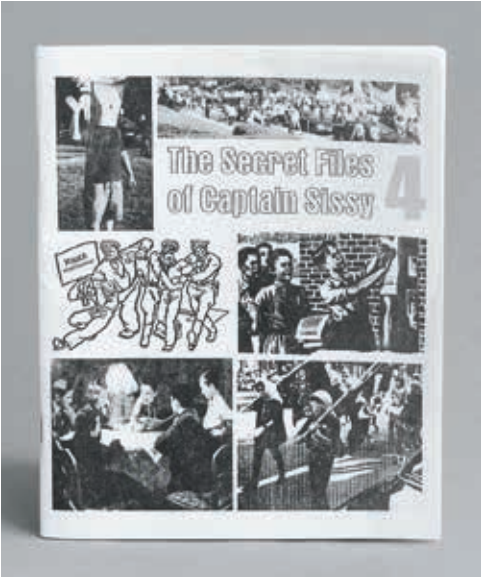
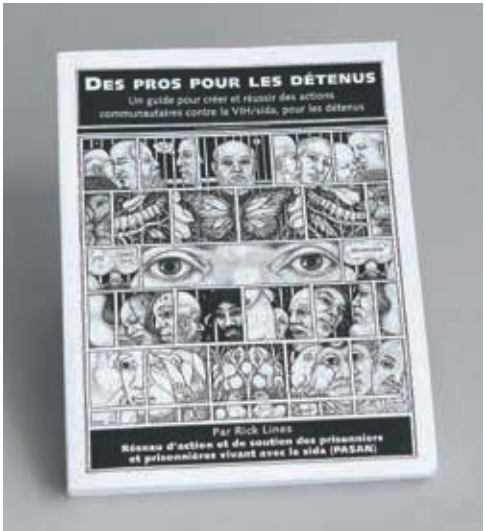
Joshua Short.  
*LAY! US/MEXICO BORDER*  
*via Wealth Race and Privilege*,  
2004



Laurie Coughlin.  
*Ice Cream Sandwich*, 2000

Rick Lines.  
*Des pros pour les détenus:*  
*Un guide pour créer et réussir*  
*des actions communautaires*  
*contre le VIH/sida, pour les*  
*détenus*, 2002

Andy Cornell.  
*The Secret Files of Captain*  
*Sissy #5*, 2004

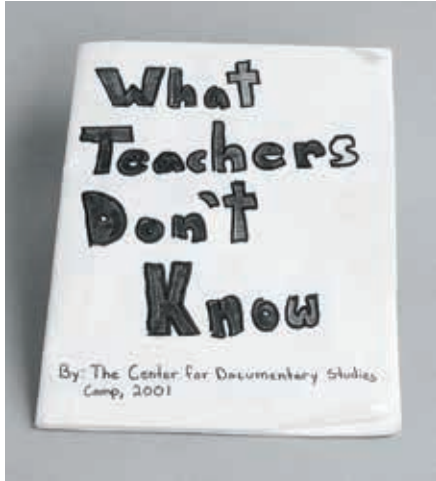




The Center for  
Documentary Studies  
Camp.  
*What Teachers Don't Know*,  
2001

Lisa Schoenberg.  
*The DIY Guide to Drumming  
for the Autonomous Rock  
Star*, 2002

Dan Wu.  
*Oriental Whatever* #7, #8,  
#9, 1999–2000



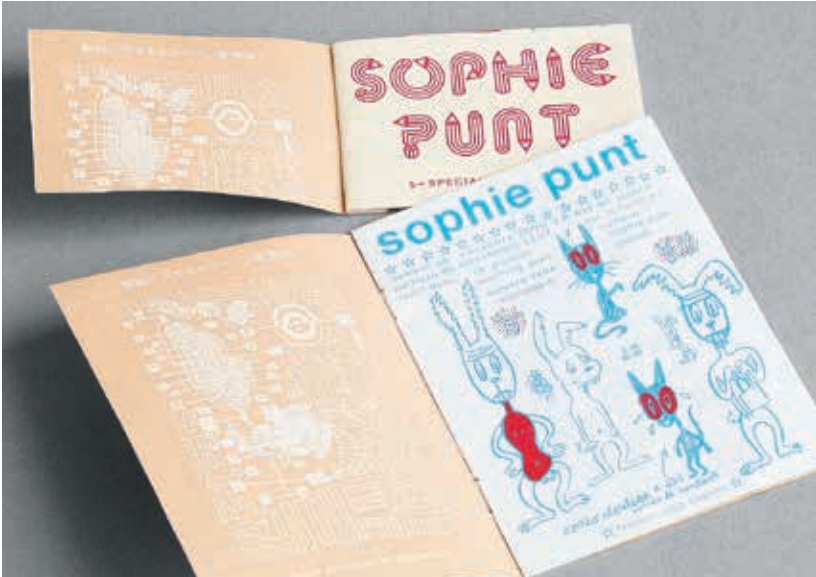
THE BOOKMOBILE BOOK



Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, editor.  
*Letters from the War Years: Some Notes on Love and Struggle in Times of War*, 2003

Gina Kamensky.  
*T-Gina* #1, 2002

Julie Doucet.  
*Sophie Punt* #1, 2000



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12  
Meredith Stern.  
*Mine: An Anthology of  
Reproductive Rights* #2,  
2003



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13  
Elissa Joy.  
*On seeing Montgomery Clift  
drunk as he was*, 1996



BOOKMOBILE team member Andy Cornell explained in a 2001 magazine article, “The shift in content over the last 15 years to zines focused mostly on the intimate details of the authors’ lives... has brought with it changes in style and production values (such as limited runs; hand-crafted or bespoke detailing; or abstract, prosaic, and narrative content) that have begun to blur the lines between zines and art books.”<sup>6</sup>

Self-publishing is not just a matter of expressing perspectives and sharing intelligence that is omitted or distorted by corporate media; it also fosters escape or relief from oppression through flights of the imagination. The trailer became a space where it was possible to experiment, develop, articulate, and communicate radically different ways of seeing, thinking, and being in the world.<sup>7</sup> Each book brings its creator’s world into being in the form of a tangible object to be shared with others as proof of one’s existence—where one lived, and what one lived for, or as Jeff Miller put it in *Otaku*, “This is the people’s history of now, or at least my history.” In their catalogue *Queer Zines*, Philip Aarons and AA Bronson suggest that the diaristic focus of queer zines—and we could expand their insight to include all “personal” zines—is impossible to imagine without second-wave feminism drawing attention to the vitality of inner life and its inextricability from the political. In my scribbled notes about the BOOKMOBILE collection, I wrote that many seemed to be “post-identity, post-theory, all ‘me,’” anticipating social media, the rise of blogs, and the decidedly queer Tumblr network in particular. At the same time, Aarons notes that “the Internet now, with all kinds of social networking sites, is working with issues of community and community connectedness in ways that are radically different from publications.”<sup>8</sup> For example, the collection is decidedly pre-“like” and pre-“comment” so that any discussion around the material would have to happen in real life (IRL), rather than anonymously and without any consequences, the way that discourse typically unfolds online. In this way the BOOKMOBILE project was distinct from an average library, where the code of silence shushes away animated discussion.

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Andy Cornell, “Books on the Run: The projet MOBILIVRE-BOOKMOBILE project builds a bridge between zines and book arts” in <i>Punk Planet</i> , Winter 2001–2002, p. 110.	Isabelle St-Amand and Leila Pourtavaf, “Le projet MOBILIVRE-BOOKMOBILE: histoire d’une bibliothèque itinérante” in <i>Argus</i> 32.3, Winter 2003, p. 40.	Philip Aarons and AA Bronson, eds., <i>Queer Zines</i> (New York: Printed Matter), 2008, p. 13.



Midnight Special Law Collective.  
*Know Your Rights Comix*, 2003

Swoon.  
*Remains: A Street Art Document* (part 2), 2003

Peter Burr.  
*Totally Gamez*, 2003



In the Artexte database, each book in the BOOKMOBILE collection has been given a number and categorized according to the producer’s name, title, place of origin, publisher and publication date, material, dimensions, and language, and is accompanied by a short description. The collection is primarily drawn from Canada and the United States, as its home bases were in Montréal and Philadelphia, both hubs of independent publishing,<sup>9</sup> with participants at various moments also living in New York, Pittsburgh, and Vancouver. One of the founders described the scope of the project, particularly in the first year, as “friend-based,” but it swiftly expanded. The material in the collection is incredibly diverse in terms of format—including a wide range of typographic, printing, and binding techniques—and in style and content, not to mention the producers and the audience(s) that each publication seeks to address.

Authors include prisoners; kids; art students; poop and plug wiring diagram enthusiasts; librarians; Jewish women; animal liberationists; seniors; drummers; exhibitionists; Catholic workers; Arab-Canadians; Mexican immigrants; Asian-American punks; queers of colour; dorks; trans women; Xicanos; fishermen; the homeless; psychiatric survivors; people with AIDS or endometriosis; “professional” artists (Jamelie Hassan, Lawrence Weiner, Harmony Korine, Amy Lockhart, Julie Doucet, Julie Voyce); rural folk; *Grey Gardens* fans; and women who have had abortions. Their publications include punk, hardcore, and hip-hop fanzines; poetry chapbooks and conceptual writing; comics and drawings; photography, printmaking, and collage; performance documentation; gossip and satire; diaries and lists; porn and manifestos; first-person accounts of demonstrations and political action; zines for kids on political issues; documents of street art and urban interventions; conspiracy theories; games and choose-your-own-adventure books;

For example, Montréal is known as a hotspot for underground and alternative comics, as well as being the home of one of the country’s largest art schools, Concordia University. Both Montréal and Philadelphia also boasted long-running anarchist bookshops that circulated radical zines and acted as community activist hubs.

Andrew Jeffrey Wright.  
*B.M.Q.* #3, #4, #5,  
1997–1999

Karen Azoulay and  
Joel Gibb.  
*The Ensemble of Tops  
'n' Bottoms*, 2002

Danny Gustina.  
*Danny's Coin Book*, 2002



guides to DIY culture and sexual health; instructional manuals such as how to tie a knot or knit your own beard; and colouring books.

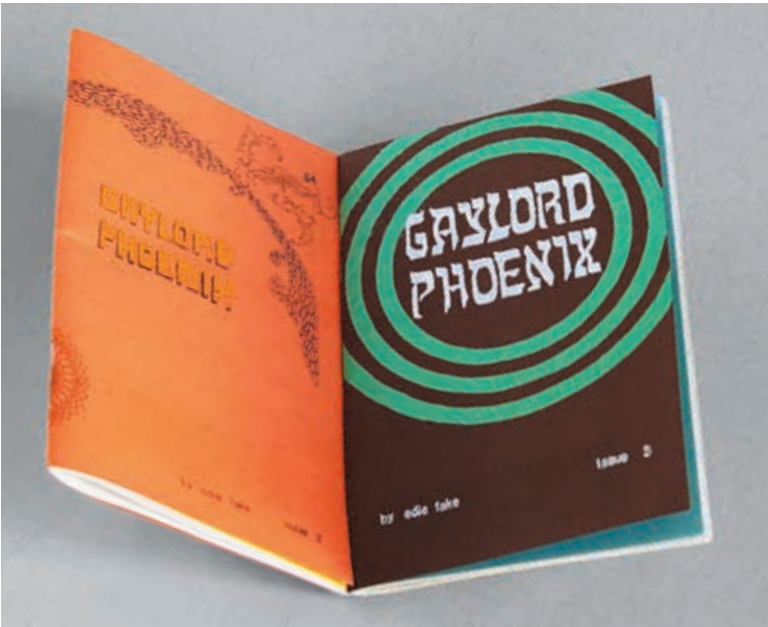
Some publications aspire to pure bawdy fun, including perennial favourite *B.M.Q.* or *Bowel Movement Quarterly* (2001 collection), “printed on dolphin safe paper” and ambitiously aiming to “save the world via poo humor.” Filled with typos and crudely handwritten, it features such sections as “draw your dream crap.” *Melvin the Electric Duck* (2001 collection), meanwhile, is ostensibly a children's book about a duck that enjoys “zapping” people and other animals without their consent, a pastime that originated during a class Melvin attended on Nietzsche. *The Ensemble of Tops 'n' Bottoms* (2002 collection), by musician Joel Gibb of The Hidden Cameras and artist Karen Azoulay, captures a nascent Toronto radical queer drag subculture with its portraits of local artist-activist luminaries like Luis Jacob and the late Will Munro dressed up as glamorous dumpster-drag characters such as “nobbling bitch troll” and “ho with cornrows.” Mark Dixon's *My Forty-Nine Hours at Walmart* (2002 collection) documents the writer's masochistic experiment of spending 49 hours straight at a Walmart, engaging in gentle acts of sabotage during his tenure in the big box store's aisles. Kevin McBride's *Magazine* (2002 collection), designed “to meet the needs of the politically correct consumer,” paints each page over in such a way that it completely obscures and censors its own content.

The third tour, in 2003, was specifically targeted to Québec with an emphasis on bilingualism. *Surprise! On a des droits?!* (2003 collection) began its life as a freely distributed French-language info-zine from Montréal's COBP (Collectif Opposé à la Brutalité Policière), informing activists, punks, and other citizens of what rights they have when confronted by the police. It was just one of many titles that year—on subjects such as neighbourhood policing and anti-terrorism legislation—published by the organization, which maintains a powerful visibility in Montréal and seeks to empower all those who are most at risk of being victimized by the state and its forces. *Flight of the Condor* (2003 collection) is a zine of pencil-crayon drawings detailing the mental collapse of the author's neighbour in a Miami apartment building, while *Free Ahmad Nelson* (2003 collection) is an impassioned, beautiful little book urging for the innocence of a New Orleans man accused of killing an off-duty policeman. *Crownfarmer* (2003 collection) describes “a brief lapse in siblingism” in brutal, unvarnished detail, reproducing an intense letter and email fight between a brother, sister, and sister's husband without any commentary or editorializing—just documents of a real-life, devastating familial meltdown. Danny Gustina's endearing *Danny's Coin Book* (2003 collection) features “American and New Zealand coin rubbings made by an 8-year-old while bored at church.”



Ginger Brooks Takahashi,  
K8 Hardy, and Emily  
Roysdon, editors.  
*LTTR* #1, 2002

Edie Fake.  
*Gaylord Phoenix* #2, #3,  
2005



*LTTR* #1 (2003 collection) is arguably one of the most influential independent publications in recent years in terms of its impact on contemporary art practices. Founded in 2001 by American artists Emily Roysdon, K8 Hardy, and Ginger Brooks Takahashi (who was also a co-founder of the BOOKMOBILE), the zine gave tangible form to the practices of scores of younger artists transforming the terrain of feminist, (gender)queer aesthetics and politics in the 21st century, particularly foregrounding collaborative projects. Their website notes, “LTTR is dedicated to highlighting the work of radical communities whose goals are sustainable change, queer pleasure, and critical feminist productivity. It seeks to create and build a context for a culture of critical thinkers whose work not only speaks in dialogue with one another, but consistently challenges its own form by shifting shape and design to best respond to contemporary concerns.”

*Gaylord Phoenix* (2004 and 2005 collections), by Edie Fake, is an endearingly strange comic whose protagonist kills his gay lover in a fit of “Crystal Blood Lust,” while *FREE ADVICE* (2005 collection) offers just that: regular people advising others on different situations from debt to having a first child to the fear of flying. The advice is not necessarily good, but that isn’t really the point.

For every canonical zine title—including *Found*, *Holy Titclamps*, *Fish Piss*, and *Infiltration*—there are many others that very few people would have seen before the BOOKMOBILE tour. It should be noted that independent publications are ephemeral not only due to their physical integrity but because of fragile economics as well. The vast majority of the publications in the collection were made with precious few funds and material resources; therefore publications announced as serials would often only last for one or two issues.<sup>10</sup> Also, a fly in the ointment in terms of archiving the collection is the so-called “regional rack,” which gathered any and all contributions made by the public at each stop along the way. Here the BOOKMOBILE project’s mandates of accessibility

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This could also partly be because the publications’ frequently young authors would move on to other projects and interests.

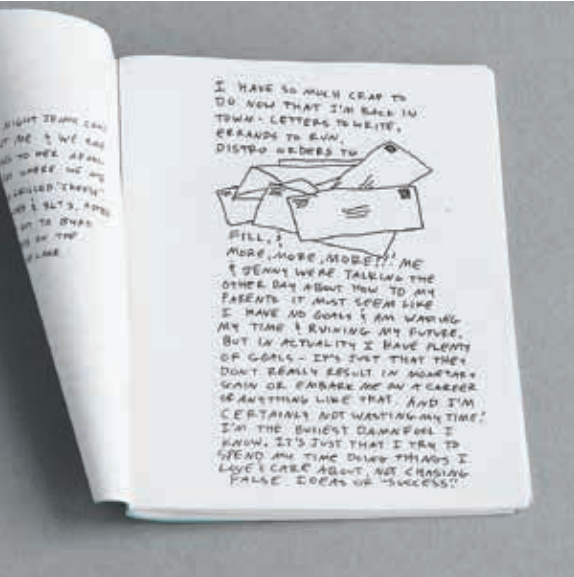


Katie Baldwin.  
*Be Careful*, 2002

Cleo Dawn Brown.  
*Untitled*, 2001

Susan Cianciolo.  
*The Run 7 Book*, 1998

Kyle Bravo.  
*These Are The Days* #2, #3,  
2001



and openness are in tension with the curatorial stewardship required of any collection of limited size, particularly now that it is professionally archived. As of the date of this book's publication, this material is not officially included in the collection.

Every year, 5-15 books would be lost or stolen on the tour; those that fell apart were kept in the protective plastic bags in which they traveled the continent. Everything in the collection is delicate to a certain degree and will enjoy greater longevity housed in the archive than it would in most readers' private collections. However, the social space of the Airstream trailer, the experience of cracking open a book for the first time, whether it be in Jag Harbor, WA or Glenis, AB, in Toronto or in Chicago, can never be replicated. The collection thus suffers the same fate as any consignment of an anti-elitist, convivial, and eclectic social experience to the archive or museum vault: a kind of ossification. If the project was intended to get artists' books out from behind glass and into people's hands, and to expose people outside art and DIY culture to these objects, what does it mean to have them stored in boxes at a somewhat austere art-scholarly archive with limited public hours? Artexte is not a place for casual hanging out and reading but for hardcore research, and it is by no means a provisional public space like the kind the BOOKMOBILE created at each port. Obviously one cannot expect the project to maintain its valuable viral function now that it is over; no longer does it have the power to infect people with the desire and skills to produce work themselves, which might next time end up on the tour. The process is in the past but the products remain; the broad audience that was fostered in situ has become a specialized one in the archive. While one could argue that the archive returns artists' books to a self-enclosed and hermetic world, the transformative experiences undergone by each and every reader-visitor remain in the world at large, circulating freely and continuing to spread the gospel of self-publishing. ■

**Jon Davies** is a Montreal-born curator and writer based in Toronto. His writing has appeared in publications such as *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Fillip*, *Little Joe*, *nomorepotlucks*, and *Cinema Scope*, and in 2009 he wrote a book on the Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey film *Trash*, for Arsenal Pulp Press' Queer Film Classics series. His curated contemporary art exhibitions include *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008) and *Kelly Jazvac: PARK* (2013) for Oakville Galleries, where he is currently the associate curator, as well as *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, co-curator) and *Coming After* (2011-2012) for The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto.

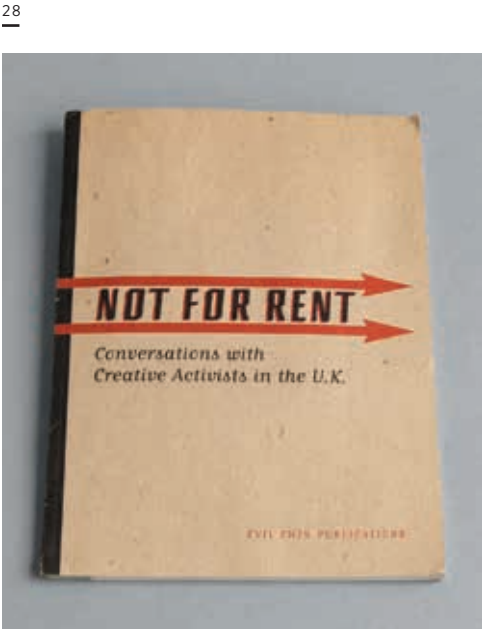
26  
Julie Doucet.  
*Sophie Punt #9: La Lenteur.*  
*Conseils pratiques et choix d'outils*, 2002



27  
Microcosm.  
*The CIA Makes Science Fiction Unexciting* #1: *The Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.*, #2: *Chemical biological weapons*, CIA documents about the AIDS virus, & “cures” killing faster than AIDS!, 2002, 2003



28  
Stacy Wakefield and Grrrt.  
*Not For Rent: Conversations with Creative Activists in the U.K.*, 1995



29  
Chris Duncan and Griffin McPartland.  
*Hot & Cold* #9, #10 (compilations), 2002, 2003



30  
Hugues Charbonneau,  
editor.  
*Petite enveloppe urbaine* #5,  
#5 supplement, 2000



31  
Barbara Balfour.  
*melancholia & melanomata*  
= *mélancholie et mélanome*, 1996



32  
Mitsuko Brooks.  
*taijin kyofu*, 2001



33  
Maura Doyle  
and Annie Dunning.  
*The Mail Order Catalogue: Double Issue*, 2001



34

Tracy Doreen and Gregg Williard.  
*How to Answer Questions from the Government: A Guidebook for Citizens // How to Question Citizens: A Guidebook for Government Agents*, 2004

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Khaela Maricich.  
*Looking is Something*, year unknown

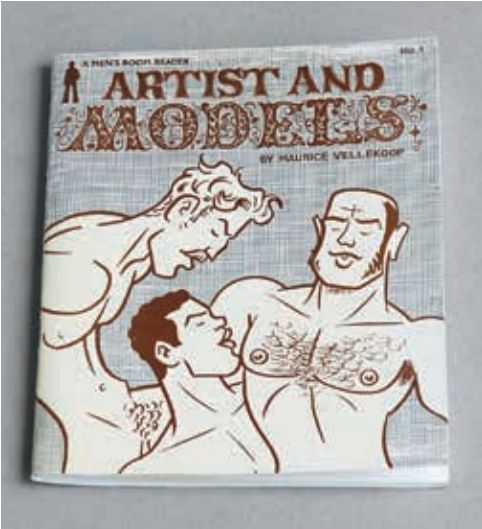
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Maurice Vellekoop.  
*Artist and Models: A Men's Room Reader #1*, 2000

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37

Leyla Majeri.  
*Sans queue ni tête* (text by Line Gamache), from the Panique collection, 2000

Leyla Majeri.  
*La caída de los angeles* (text by Benavidez Bedoya), from the Panique collection, 2001

37



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38

Mickry3.  
*BestellKATALOG*, 2001

39

Mat Brinkman.  
*Paperrodeo #12* (compilation), 2002

40

Patrick Frey, editor.  
*GRR8 Zürich*, 2002

40





41

Mattathias Schwartz,  
editor and publisher.  
*The Philadelphia Independent*  
Vol 1, #1, 2002

42

JB Staniforth.  
*Querencia #5: "Don't Let  
 Our Youth Go To Waste,"*  
*#6: America the Beautiful,*  
*#7: One More Cup of Coffee*  
*For the Road, 2001–2003*

43

Lily Gilbert and Iris Porter.  
XYZ, 2002



42



44



44

Pilot Chicago.  
*Pilot TV Guide*  
(compilation), 2004

45

Lauren Jade Martin.  
*quantify* #5, 2003

46

Ayun Halliday.  
*The East Village Inky* #25,  
2004

43



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47

Emily K Larned.  
*Parfait 2*, 2005

48

Annette Monnier.  
*Kittens & Cats 2005*  
*Calendar*, 2005

49

Nikki McClure.  
*welcome*, 2004

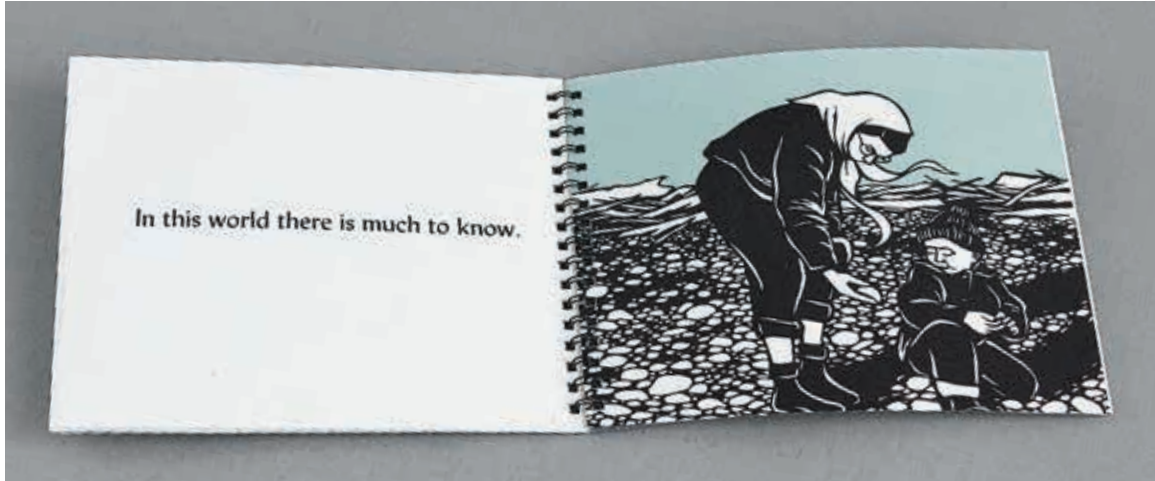
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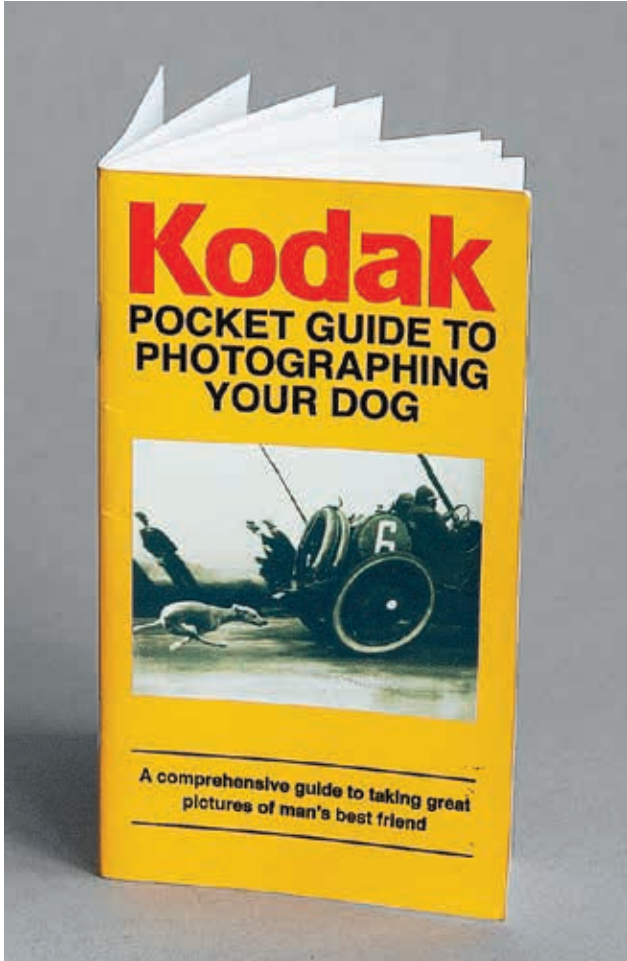
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Daniel Aycock.  
*Kodak Pocket Guide to*  
*Photographing Your Dog:*  
*A comprehensive guide to*  
*taking great pictures of man's*  
*best friend*, 2005

51

Tennessee Jones.  
*Teenage Death Songs* #11,  
#13, 1999, 2000

52

Suzan Sherman.  
*b carved*. 2000

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