

*the live & performed
the inscribed & recorded.*

It has been nearly twenty years since Jane Rollo, at Bookworks, gave me Susan Johanknecht's phone number. I remember ringing up out of the blue and arranging to meet.

Our lives are curiously parallel: literature and printing were backdrops to both our lives in different ways, but we had chosen to work in a Fine Art context. Both have transatlantic families and we work in the incestuous world of London's art schools. Each is individually engaged with the live & performed as the other side of the coin to the inscribed & recorded. And in the mid 1980's we had small children.

Susan & I started work together on kitchen tables and wherever else served as studio spaces, over cups of coffee (mindful of fair trade, in a solicitous way rather than correct manner). We made each other comfortable and that, I think, is the key to a happy collaboration. A generosity of spirit allows things that are uneasy to be aired and over the years we have witnessed each others hopes and anxieties.

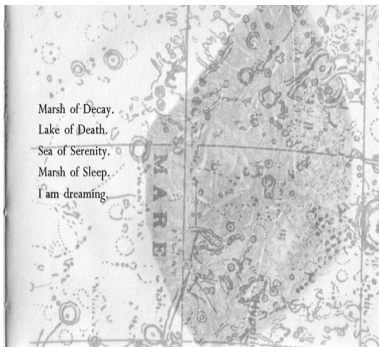
Susan has worked with a range of other artists in different capacities, through the Gefn Press, building a reputation for serious but quirky publications.

Our first book together **Mare Fecunditatis : Seas of the Moon** is a work that uses the geographical place names of the moon, combined with a somatic account of childbirth, that was very much of its time. I wrote. Susan printed magnificent collographed imagery and maps that we had chosen together. Then **Eat** book, in which I rewrote nursery rhymes, tongue in cheek, and gleaned imagery from the everyday: nurturing things, serving as double edged, without sentimentality. Susan printed this and worked with her great friend and mentor Claire van Vliet at the Janus Press, where it was bound and finished.

Our next work **Emissions**, was an Arts Council/New Collaborations initiative, again I wrote - a lament about disease and the subjects of its treatments. But this time we made a shift in production methods, together we burned holes, stuck and stitched. The collaborative aspect had started to unfix the divisions of labour.

A different way of working together was emerging. We could write together, thrash out rough drafts, go away and rethink, come back and rewrite together. I cannot imagine how this is possible. But it is.

In 2000 we produced **Volumes (of vulnerability)** as a counter to the heroic in millennium culture. This was as much a curatorial initiative as anything, making a portable exhibition. A tin acted as the binding for fragile contributions, from which we could fill a gallery. **Volumes (of vulnerability)** was the start of a new phase of editorial collaborations as artists' books, which has also produced **Cunning Chapters** (shortly to be exhibited at the British Library). In both these collections we have worked with a wide range of makers: poets, performance artists, photographers, archaeologists and academics.



Seas of the Moon



Eat



Emissions

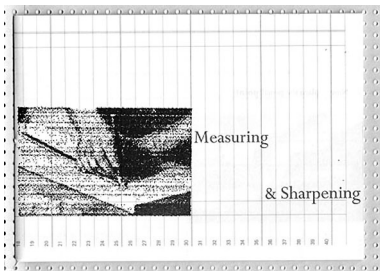


Volumes (of vulnerability)



Here are my Instructions

a siting of work



Measuring and Sharpening

not knowing the answers

*It is easier to argue...
than thrash it out in ones own head*

In Here are my Instructions Susan worked with Redell Olsen on a series of poetic events that took place over a five month period on the wall of the cafe at the Poetry Society. The resulting publication stands in as a partial record of this, visual eloquence as much as textual reading.

When writing about these collaborations as “artists’ books” I use the term to imply a siting of work as much as a form, that establishes a loose notion of what sits “between the covers”.

Susan has consciously wished to push at the limits of categorisation. She situates her critical context as one that is active, in what Rosalind Krauss would term a “post-medium condition”. As a consequence of this the Gefn Press addresses the divisions that have been created to separate the notion of “art” from “craft” and the vested interests in opening up, or closing, this divide.

Themes and preoccupations reoccur in various guises in these collective projects. Through their construction Gefn Press publications demonstrate that technologies are coded. They produce complex meanings and layering of conventions implied by the physical support and its appearance. Susan’s individual works have often taken this structuralist aesthetic as the core text as well, in books such as **Creep** or **Measuring and Sharpening**.

In these works there has been an ethical edge, inserting something a little bit awkward into the mix, but without being didactic and not knowing the answers. This is often arrived at through quotidian concerns, the “personal as political” surviving in a feminist perspective that has become unfashionable, but for which it is surely time for revival.

By collaborating on multiple art work, notions of individual authenticity and authorship are pushed aside. Thus the work effectively operates conceptually in a sphere which does not seek ownership of marks & gesture or uniqueness of object.

Many of these works have been made in small editions, not for rarity, but for economy. This deliberately enables careful crafting and attention to detail, preventing labour wastage as well as paper wastage. It extends the repertoire of technologies available: letterpress, photocopy or digital ‘print-it-yourself’ pdf files.

In knowing that what we produce is for a specialist audience, a collective state enables self doubt to be more readily dissipated. It is easier to argue the merits of an idea with each other than thrash it out in ones own head. This requires honesty and trust that is rare in any relationship, a large part of which comes from the long conversations preceding anything we do. We find ourselves in a wider context which fetishises the individual and invents art-stars. What the Gefn Press does in collaboration is a modest counterculture, focusing the ambition for the work itself.

Katharine Meynell
spring 2007