

THE BUNFOLDER

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Sheryl Oring sets up her "IWish to Say" office on the Belmont University campus in Nashville, Oct. 2008. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel

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Capturing the Quotidian: Book Artists Explore New Tools – Performance, Travel and Story Collecting – to Reveal a Community’s Character

By Miriam Schaar

Hillary Clinton popularized the maxim that it takes a village to raise a child. Sometimes it also takes a village to make a book. At least that’s how several adventurous female book artists see it. The artists crisscrossed nations, their own and others, to collect stories they published in lively, idiosyncratic books. They also became characters in their own scenarios, assuming personas that turned their research into a kind of traveling performance art.

Foremost among them are San Diego-based Sheryl Oring, who often posed as a public secretary; faux Girl Scouts Jennie Hinchcliff and Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, a.k.a. the Pod Post Press; and Annabel Other, self-anointed Head Librarian of The Bristol Art Library (TBAL) in the United Kingdom.

We’ll look at their work below, noting first that the book arts world has long attracted artists who collect stories for broader audiences, like the pioneering folklorists who crisscrossed Appalachia in search of old songs. In the Seventies, for example, artists like Alison Knowles, associated with the Fluxus Movement, and Yoko Ono helped make performance art as well as artist books more familiar to today’s artists.

More recently, Margot Lovejoy solicited readers’ secrets on her website (www.confess-it.com), and used their confessions for artist books and installations. In New York City, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloane composed *Crossing the Boulevard* (W.W. Norton), a book plus CD that celebrates the stories of immigrants in Queens, where both live and work. Lehrer and Sloane also perform many of the book’s dramatic stories in a theatrical staging.

Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki, known as Two Girls Working (www.twogirlsworking.com), asked women, “What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?” Their answers appear in *Trappings, Stories of Women, Power and Clothing* (Rutgers University Press), a handsome book that makes clothing the vehicle for exploring issues of class, sexuality, and race.

Sheryl Oring, Jennie Hinchcliff, Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, and Annabel Other uniquely embody this confluence of bookmaking, performance, travel, collecting and community. Each embarked on a long-running, long-distance performance, engaging audiences of hundreds or thousands

a few at a time. For years they adopted the personas of a secretary, a pair of Girl Scouts, and a librarian, complete with costumes and props. Staying in character throughout their wanderings, they projected the voices of private individuals into the public sphere, collecting communal stories from behind the scenes or as front-and-center facilitators channeling the wisdom and wishes of otherwise silent citizens.

Sheryl Oring – Secretary to the Unvoiced



Sheryl Oring sets up her I Wish to Say office on the Belmont University campus in Nashville, Oct. 2008. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

Sheryl Oring began her interactive *I Wish To Say* series in 2004 as a response to the Bush administration; junior’s, that is. A journalist who had worked for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*, Oring wanted to give a voice to ordinary citizens she felt mainstream media overlooked.

She set up a “portable public office,” complete with a 1950s turquoise Royal Quiet De Lux manual typewriter, and traveled the country asking people how they would answer the question, “If I were the President, what would you wish to say to me?” Inspired by memories of a secretarial grandmother, she dressed in hot pink, bright yellow or robin’s-egg blue dresses from the Fifties. She was always perfectly manicured, and often accessorized by fabulous sunglasses and a feather boa. The effect was a persona that was part Marlo Thomas’ *That Girl* and part Dora, the public letter writer in Walter Salles’ *Central Station*.

Oring conducted her first session in Oakland, California, with support from The First Amendment Project. People lined up around the block, waiting their turn. Afterward, she crisscrossed the country, setting up her desk, among other venues, in a laundromat in Tuba City, Arizona; a park along Los Angeles’ Skid Row; on the Las Vegas Strip; in public squares and college campuses; and at several locations

in Boston and New York City during 2004's Democratic and Republican presidential conventions. During the latter, the late Peter Jennings, then anchor of ABC's *World News Tonight*, named Oring a Person of the Week, focusing a rare national spotlight on an artist book project. The clip is available on YouTube at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbF1IVfLCII>>.

Sheryl Oring on ABC World News Tonight

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Oring typed more than 1,000 postcards bearing such comments as “Dear Mr. President... We need help. You help people in Iraq when they need it. Over here, we’ve needed help ever since I can remember and we’re not getting help.” And: “It’s really hard to find a job on the reservation. You can work at the grocery store or at the pizza place. But it’s hard to find a professional, career-oriented job.” And: “Please stop saying things you can’t back up.” And much more.



Sheryl Oring takes a letter in lower Manhattan, 2004. Photo: Brian Palmer.

She stamped the cards “Urgent,” had her correspondents sign them, snapped their pictures, and sent the originals to the White House. She retained carbons for a booklet, exhibitions, archiving, and her website <http://iwishtosay.org/index.php>>.

Oring kept her own political feelings out of the project. She was surprised by how widely people’s pleas varied and how little they seemed to comport with stereotypes about political attitudes attached to locations. She was also surprised by how accepted her persona was. “I’m still amazed how people seek me out, when in my outfit,” she said. “It’s a completely different experience from journalism, where you are often met with resistance when trying to get someone’s opinion.”



Sheryl Oring channels a youthful voice in Houston, 2006. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

In 2006, Oring launched *I Wish To Say: The Birthday Project*, inviting people to send 60th birthday wishes to then President Bush. As in the first project, the dictated cards expressed all sides of the political spectrum. Oring, as usual, was careful to not interject her thoughts. As before, she often found herself surprised and moved by the emotions she encountered. One woman said, “So disappointed in the way you’ve handled the Iraq war situation. What were you thinking?” Said another, “Happy birthday. I would rather my president lies about sex than war.” Said a couple, “Quit spending so much money. And make the tax cuts permanent... We’re 100% with you on the war on terror.”

Again, Oring hit the road. She conducted an 11,000-mile cross-country trek to parks and flea markets in Brooklyn, Indianapolis, Raleigh, Tampa, Houston, Des Moines, Albuquerque, and Yosemite, among other locales, with funding from Creative Capital, the Puffin Foundation, and the New York Foundation for the Arts, among other sources.



I Wish to Say: The Birthday Project, Sheryl Oring's limited edition of eight artist book based on her 2006 tour. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.



Early editions of I Wish to Say. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

The result, *I Wish to Say (The Birthday Project)*, was a full-color, 140-page book published by Quack! Media Press in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Packed with photographs by Dhanraj Emanuel, the book is a delightful exercise in cross-cultural empowerment.

Oring revisited the project in 2008, the year Barack Obama faced off against John McCain. She mounted 20 exhibitions around the country, and made herself available for visitors to write cards to both candidates. She was surprised by the intensity of criticism of the Gulf wars, and by the amount of optimism about the possibility of change. Results were sent to both parties.

Oring feels her work, always collaborative, is a natural outgrowth of her journalism. Currently working on a project called *Creative Fix* with the New Children's Museum in San Diego, she has been asking artists, musicians, architects and students to describe how they would fix the country, if they could.

Pod Post Press, Making Every Day a Good Mail Day

Jennie Hinchcliff and Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, The Pod Post Press (www.podpost.com), are on a mission. In our email-besotted world, they want to rehabilitate the art of letter writing. Through traditional letters and mail art, Hinchcliff and Wheeler are finding worldwide communities through the U.S. postal service.



Carolee Wheeler (left) and Jennie Hinchcliff, aka the Pod Post Press.

Wheeler is a conservation technician at Stanford University Libraries who teaches at the San Francisco Center for the Book, and conducts collaborative projects with other artists. Hinchcliff teaches book arts at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, and works on independent book arts projects under the banner of *Red Letter Day*, the name of a quarterly she publishes and edits. They met in 2006 at the annual Bay Area Book Arts Jam in Los Altos Hills. Immediately drawn to each other's ideas, they decided to work together as the Pod Post Press.

The Press soon consumed the bulk of their artistic practice, which they largely attribute to the positive reinforcement of working as a team. They sometimes lament the lack of reward for and acknowledgment of the skills they have mastered to bind books, edit and publish zines, and print in letterpress. But both agree the feedback from their mailed out project is especially gratifying and keeps the Press moving forward.

Presentation makes the Pod Post unique. Hinchcliff and Wheeler travel frequently to zine fests and book jamborees, encouraging the use of everyday materials to make art. They also created a system of "permissions," entitling anyone to make art. Using the merit badges offered by the Girl and Boy Scout organizations as a model, they designed their own series of 18 merit badges (available on their website) honoring those

who learn the skills needed for Bookbinding, Printmaking, Zinemaking, and Correspondence. (The Boy Scouts, themselves, offered a book binding kit and merit badge for craftsmanship from 1911 to 1926.)

Further tweaking the Girl Scout image, Hinchcliff and Wheeler began attending public events dressed in scout-like windowpane-gray plaid shirtwaist dresses, adorned with jaunty berets and broad sashes displaying their Pod Press badges. The response was overwhelming. As people came over to see what was going on, they were able to engage a new audience.



Pod Post Poster, featuring the Pod Post Mail Art Bento Box.

The costumes helped break down barriers as the pair set in motion their democratic approach to making art. They first tried the idea at the Curiosity Shoppe in San Francisco, a store and gallery specializing in affordable art. Shoppe-goers were invited to create valentines embellished with rubber stamps before mailing. The event was a great success.

The duo has also collaborated on several other projects, including *3-2-2-1*, a book for which each turned on her iPod and noted the first ten songs in shuffle mode. They assigned each song an artificial Dewey Decimal number, then headed to the San Francisco Public Library where they found the books that corresponded to the fake Dewey Decimal numbers. The book *3-2-2-1* is a conceptual dialogue between the Dewey Decimal System and popular music, reinventing the origins of each.



A selection of individual and collaborative artist books from the Pod Post Press.

Hinchcliff and Wheeler were surprised by how seriously many people take their badges. Pod Post Press fans often feel they can only adopt the badges when they have earned each level. One printer told them she felt comfortable with the first two letterpress badges, but felt she needed more practice to earn the third. Badges for some skills have become a self-assessment tool.

In 2009, they published *Good Mail Day, A Primer for Making Eye-Popping Postal Art* by Quarry Press <<http://www.Good-Mail-Day.com>>. The book is a glorious paean to the joys of mail art, covering decorated envelopes, faux postage, artist stamps penmanship, pen pals, developing a (non-violent) postal personality, and lots of DIY mail art projects. Its 6,000-copy first edition sold out in a month. The book is now in its third printing.

The Pods travel frequently to make presentations, show their work, and preach their postal gospel; mostly on the West Coast, but twice to Tokyo. In June 2009, they participated in “Modes of Production: Collaborative Processes,” a panel at the Hybrid Book Conference in Philadelphia.

The daughter of a postal worker, Wheeler said the most exciting thing about the project was learning her retired father had read *Good Mail Day* and started to make his own mail art – hand-decorated envelopes and letters with stories – and was sending them to children in the neighborhood. After all, if you never receive anything wonderful in the mail, how would you know you should send a wonderful bit of mail art back?

Annabel Other and the National Library of Bristol

The Bristol Art Library (TBAL), founded in 1998 to protest the closing of the Bristol Art Library in England, has survived the original. TBAL is a fully functioning public lending library housed in a small wood cabinet the size of a suitcase. Annabel Other, appearing as its Head Librarian, meticulously administers the facility. Clad in dowdy-chic tweeds and retro-styled spectacles, she issues readers tickets, guides book choices, commissions new volumes, and shushes sharply if necessary.

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Annabel Other, as the Head Librarian, with TBAL at a seaside resort in Eastbourne, England.

Resembling an altarpiece triptych, the library's open doors reveal a treasury of volumes. The tiny four-by-five-inch books are identically bound in terracotta book cloth. Titles and author names are gold-stamped on each cover, with a gold-tooled Dewey Decimal number stamped on each slim spine. For the books' contents, Other approached 70 artists and non-artists who contributed works on a broad range of subjects in the arts and sciences that unfolded in an expanding collection of more than 200 books, at last count.

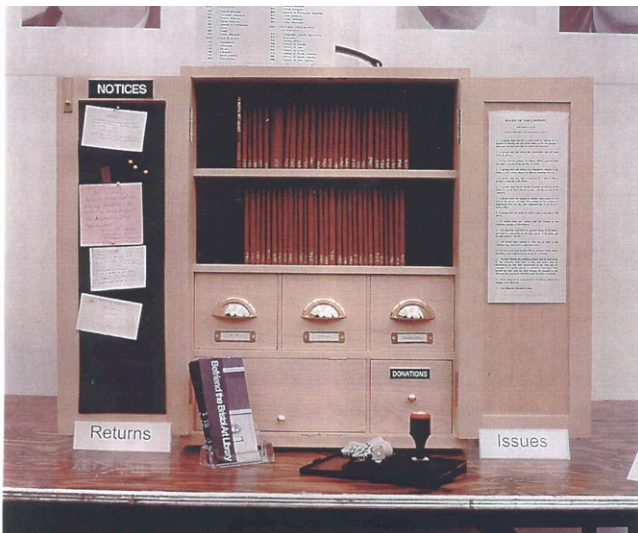


The Head Librarian with library enthusiasts in Warsaw, Poland.

Speaking about the library, Other stays strictly in character as The Head Librarian, a woman she describes as true to her mission. The Head Librarian created TBAL, says Other, when she was down on her luck and needed a job. But the Head Librarian also wanted to run her own library immediately, lacking the patience to work her way up the professional librarian ladder. Other adds that the woman she calls her "doppelgänger" is "committed to keeping the library going into the far future, and remaining accessible to any and all who are interested."

The project is homage to librarians and the idea of personal attention from real people, the antithesis of Google searching. The Library has traveled to venues around the world, including Poland, Japan, and the U.S., where it was first shown at the Drawing Center in New York City's SoHo district in 1998. In 2000, an Arts Council of England grant enabled the Head Librarian to tour TBAL around Britain's great and formerly great seaside resorts, visiting Eastbourne, Cromer, Newquay and Margate, among other towns. Other wheeled the library trolley to individuals for room service, and during teatime in the slightly tattered lobbies and atriums that heralded a bygone era.

Each summer, the library participates in the Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts in Piton, Somerset. Glastonbury is best known for contemporary music, but jugglers, acrobats, dancers and performance artists all take the stage. At Glastonbury, the Head Librarian works with five assistant librarians, specially trained for the event in book-stamping, shushing and other techniques, under a big blue and white tent. Over the years, TBAL has issued more than 30,000 Library Cards to its members worldwide. Members become Friends of the Bristol Art Library (FOTBAL) and receive the library's newsletter. As in the best public libraries, membership is free.



The Bristol Art Library.

In fact, TBAL provides nothing to buy, although a gift shop once sold tea towels, bookmarks and postcards in its support. Unlike *I Wish to Say* and The Pod Post Press, TBAL does not even possess a website, and the Head Librarian says she is ambivalent about creating one. Its Web presence is on Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bristol_Art_Library>, and other sites where articles about TBAL appear. Despite inquiries, the library is emphatically not for sale.

Other continues to explore the idea of art that has nothing to sell. For *Art Tea in the Vanish Van*, she parked a large van with a built-in camera obscura near a bus stop in Bristol. Wearing a vintage floral housedress, and playing the gracious hostess, she invited people, one at a time, waiting for the bus into the van. Each guest was served a cup of tea and a cupcake and invited to share a travel story. Guests could watch for the bus through the lens of the camera obscura. When the bus arrived, the guest (100 at last count) was gifted a cup imprinted with an image of the bus stop and dangling a hang-tag describing the project and the unusual vehicle.

This transformed the cup into a kind of collectable book object, leaving each guest with a keepsake in return for his or her story, and enhancing the presence of the cup. A video and photographs documented the event, which can be sampled at <http://www.electricpavilion.org/content/tranquil/art_tea>

Creating community is an important theme running through all Other's projects. In her latest, Other invited staff at the Bristol City Museum and Gallery to tea, along with staff from the adjoining parking garage. Although their buildings connect, the two staffs had never met. Through the ritual of tea, they got to know each other, gave each other tours of their respective institutions, and split the tea service

between them, keeping the parts as souvenirs.

Books are a perfect interdisciplinary medium. They utilize text, images, narrative, and movement. They encourage experiment and sharing, and inspire works in other media. It's not a big leap for book artists to take another step into performance. The style of bookmaking Oring, Hinchcliff, Wheeler and Other pursue isn't for everyone. But for those with a penchant for people, performance, and travel it can be a wonderful, innovative way to produce books that are both highly personal and the revealing expression of a larger society's thinking, character and desires.

Miriam Schaer (www.miriamschaer.com) is a practicing book artist based in Brooklyn, New York, and a Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary MFA Program in Book and Paper at Columbia College Chicago. She can be contacted at <mschaer@colum.edu>.