

# *Perfect unbinding: the production and circulation of Beau Geste Press editions*

Article

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... BOOK WORKS, THIS SINGULAR, ALMOST MODEST VARIATION IN ART, STAND OUT AS ONE OF THE MOST GENEROUS ANSWERS THE XX CENTURY COULD HAVE OFFERED. THIS IS MY OPINION. FELIPE EHRENBURG -- BEAU GESTE PRESS (LIVES ON)





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Felipe Ehrenberg

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# PERFECT UNBINDING

## THE PRODUCTION AND CIRCULATION OF BEAU GESTE PRESS EDITIONS

Mila Waldeck

In the 1970s, the publishing house Beau Geste Press produced and distributed a diverse range of artists' books within a significantly international group of readers and contributors. As much as possible, the press aimed at not interfering with the contributors' works, as publishing was associated with artistic freedom. This study focuses on the creation and circulation of Beau Geste Press editions, asking to what extent the printing process was embodied in the artists' authorship. Primary sources of the Mayor / Fluxshoe / Beau Geste Press collection held at the Tate Gallery Archive indicate that the press and its contributors worked collaboratively, hence the printing process tended to be integrated in the published artwork. The role of the author and the publisher were less central and leading at Beau Geste Press, compared to other publishing models from the history of books. As a publisher of artists' books, Beau Geste Press worked in the intersection between the art world and the publishing channel, yet the assimilation of the editions is different in each one of these spheres.

### BEFORE AND AFTER LANGFORD COURT

The publishing house Beau Geste Press was founded in 1971 in Britain and issued approximately seventy-five titles<sup>1</sup> in five years. Its name is a reference to its first printing machine, a Gestetner mimeograph duplicator which, conversely, was also called "Beau Geste."<sup>2</sup> This is indicative of the key role of the printing process at the press, whose history can be schematically divided into two phases due to differences in organization and production along the years. The literature on the press has underlined its connection with the Fluxus group, as well as the international artists' network involved in its editions, particularly in the magazine *Schmuck*, one of its most well-known titles (Conwell 2010; Debroise and Medina 2007; Gilbert 2012). Throughout different analyses articulated in this literature, the organization of Beau Geste Press as a community of artists has been commonly emphasized.

The community corresponds to the period between 1971 and 1974, when the press was based in Langford Court, a farmhouse near the small town of Cullompton where a team of artists, craftsmen and printers lived and worked together. In early 1974 the group split and the press relocated to a new address in Cullompton and subsequently to Cranleigh. This separation was accompanied by a significant change in production, marking the beginning of a second phase. Tellingly, the newsletters of the first phase often announced Beau Geste Press as a community, but this description seems to cease after mid 1974. Given the distinctions between the Langford Court period and the following years, it is possible therefore to divide the history of the press into two periods: from 1971 to early 1974, and from 1974 to 1976, when the press virtually ceased operations.<sup>3</sup>

The press – or the community – began in 1971 with artists Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion, their children Matthias and Yael, illustrator Chris Welch and his partner Madeleine Gallard. In late 1971, the group was joined by David Mayor, then a postgraduate student at Exeter University. In the preface of Ehrenberg's book *Minimimeofolio*, produced between 1971 and 1972 and the first Beau Geste Press publication, the author tells that the company started when Martha found a Gestetner 300 mimeograph printer,

"which we bought for 50 quid in London and lugged all the way down to Devon and set up in this new/old place we found and live with Matthias and Yael and Chris and Madeleine and now David" (Ehrenberg 1972a).<sup>4</sup>

Ehrenberg and Hellion, originally from Mexico, had moved to England with their children due to the political repression in 1968 in Mexico,<sup>5</sup> which also precipitated the end of the magazine *El Corno*

*Eplumado* (*The Plumed Horn*) for which Ehrenberg worked. Edited by poets Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón, the magazine focused on literature and also covered art and politics, being internationally represented by writers and publishers such as Hansjörg Mayer in Germany and Haroldo de Campos in Brazil. Hellion (2006) comments that *El Corno Eplumado* had "a broad circulation, which eventually helped create a network of people with similar interests." This experience influenced Beau Geste Press and expanded its circle of contributors – Ulises Carrión and Cecilia Vicuña, for example, had published in *El Corno Eplumado* before issuing their Beau Geste Press titles. Ehrenberg created several illustrations and three out of thirty-one covers of the magazine.<sup>6</sup>

David Mayor and Felipe Ehrenberg first met in 1970 following an exhibition of Ehrenberg's works at the Sigi Krauss Gallery in London. Mayor was then organizing a Fluxus festival in Britain – an initiative of his professor Mike Weaver and American Fluxus artist Ken Friedman, which took place as the Fluxshoe travelling exhibition from 1972 to 1973. After Mayor moved to Langford Court, the press and the exhibition became mutually tied, as the Beau Geste Press community issued the Fluxshoe printed material and helped produce the festival.

The collaboration between Beau Geste Press and the international network of Fluxus artists progressed, leading to new titles made during the travelling exhibition and after that. Fluxus artist Takako Saito joined the Langford Court group around 1973 and remained at the press for nearly two years. Hendricks (1988, p. 459) states that Fluxus founder George Maciunas admired Saito's craftsmanship and commissioned her to make numerous pieces for Fluxus editions and events throughout the 1960s and 1970s. She printed several titles of the second phase of Beau Geste Press, relocating to Italy in March 1975 to work as a resident artist for a Fluxus collector.

In 1972, letterpress printer Terry Wright and his wife Patricia Wright moved to Langford Court.<sup>7</sup> This brought about a typographic shift in the editions, which until then were usually typewritten. In the same year, offset equipment was obtained, and this combination of techniques – mimeograph, offset, typewriter, letterpress – as well as the diversity of Beau Geste Press contributors, resulted in a varied production.

The press published several titles signed by authors from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Iceland, Japan and Britain. Members of the community – including the children Matthias and Yael Ehrenberg – also created their own books.<sup>8</sup> A collaborative work between visiting artists directly or indirectly linked to the Beau Geste Press circle was also possible at Langford Court. In Ehrenberg's description, the artists received accommodation and access to the means of production and distribution of their editions, and in return they worked on daily tasks at the press and covered the costs of material (Conwell, 2010, p. 186).

Several titles issued in 1973 were probably produced in this way, such as *Arguments* and *Tras la Poesia* (*Looking for Poetry*) by Ulises Carrión, from Mexico; *Saborami* by Cecilia Vicuña, from Chile; *El Cansador Intrabajable* by Claudio Bertoni, from Chile; *Or* by Kristjan Gudmundsson, from Iceland; and *Works in Progress*, 1972-73, by Yukio Tsuchiya, from Japan.

Other titles representative of the first phase are David Mayor and Helen Chadwick's *Door to Door* (1973), whose photographic sequence was taken during an event at Fluxshoe [fig. 1], and *Parts of a Body House Book* (1972) by Carolee Schneemann. The publication of Fluxshoe-related material also marks the first phase of Beau Geste Press, but editions by Fluxus artists were issued in both phases, such as *The Aesthetics*, by Ken Friedman, published in 1972, and *Me Ben I*



1



11



15



1

fig 1  
*Door to Door* (first and last spreads), Helen Chadwick and David Mayor, 1973. 16 × 20 cm. Beau Geste Press.  
Image reproduced with permission of David Mayor.



*Sign*, by Ben Vautier, issued in 1975. Titles finished in the second phase could have started in the Langford Court period. The *Schmucks* are an example, whose call for contributions dates back to 1972.

*Schmuck's* thematic editions focused on Japan, Iceland, Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and France, epitomizing the international presence of Beau Geste Press also achieved in other publications. The magazine involved both readership and contributors from different locations, reaching North and Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe and Japan. Among the editions produced in the first phase of Beau Geste Press were *Schmuck* number one (1972), *Schmuck Iceland* (1972), *Schmuck Hungary* (1973) and *Schmuck Czechoslovakia* (1974), although the latter was finished in the transition between the two phases. After the Langford Court period, Mayor worked intensively on the publication of the *French, General* and *Teutonic Schmucks* in 1975, and finally on the *Japanese Schmuck*, published in 1976.<sup>9</sup>

In early 1974 Ehrenberg returned to Mexico with his children, and Mayor and Takako Saito moved to a new address in Cullopton.<sup>10</sup> The idea was to continue the international production and distribution of Beau Geste Press from two bases: one in Britain led by David Mayor and another one in Mexico led by Felipe Ehrenberg. The press was cleared of printing equipment when the group left Langford Court, but Mayor and Takako Saito purchased an offset machine and guillotine, while Ehrenberg worked to install a printshop in his new address in Mexico. Personal circumstances eventually postponed the production in Mexico, yet Myra Landau's *Si Sabes Ver*, issued in 1975 by Beau Geste Press and printed at Taller Editorial under the coordination of Rodrigo Moya, is representative of the activities of the press in Mexico. Meanwhile, Ehrenberg mailed artworks for Beau Geste Press editions such as the cover of *General Schmuck*, and he was also engaged in promoting, selling and exhibiting Beau Geste Press in Mexico and Latin America.

Takako Saito and Mayor printed the Beau Geste Press editions from 1974 to 1975; but after her departure in March 1975 the production was chiefly led by Mayor. Alternatively, the printing was sometimes outsourced, especially after Saito's departure from the UK – Endre Tot's *Night Visit to the National Gallery* was probably the last book that she printed at Beau Geste Press. Through an intense mail correspondence, Mayor pursued and maintained the collaborations with artists from abroad that characterizes Beau Geste Press, also prioritizing the international distribution.

Collaborations between Beau Geste Press and other presses marked the second phase of the press. Several titles from 1974 onwards were co-publications, although collaborative editions were also possible in the first phase. Ulises Carrión's *Argumentos* and *Tras la Poesía* (*Looking for Poetry*), for example, were issued in Langford Court with In-Out Centre, a cultural centre and collective group based in Amsterdam which included artists Ulises Carrión, from Mexico; Hreinn Fridfinnsson, Kristján and Sigurður Guðmundsson, from Iceland; and Michel Cardena and Raul Marroquin, from Colombia. However, this practice became more frequent between 1974 and 1976. Connections started in the first phase could also evolve as an association of publishers – this was probably the case of Raul Marroquin's company Mad Enterprises in Maastricht, which issued a few books with Beau Geste Press in 1974. British poet Allen Fisher, published by Beau Geste Press in 1972 was also one of its partners in the second phase through Aloes Books, founded by Fisher, poet Richard Miller and printer Jim Pennington. Finally, some of the last Beau Geste Press titles such as *Japanese Schmuck* were printed by Tony Ward, whose press Arc Publications was also associated with Beau Geste Press. Editions of the second phase also often have the imprint Libro Acción Libre, led by Ehrenberg in Mexico.

While these multiple associations probably had a practical function, since they potentially released some responsibilities and covered some expenses, they were also indicative of the overall collaborative structure of Beau Geste Press, which encompassed both phases despite the different publishing processes in Langford Court and afterwards. Mayor assigned the distribution in North America and Japan to Larry Wallrich, the bookseller and publisher of Ruby Editions who relocated from Britain to Canada in mid 1975. At that time Ulises Carrión became the distributor of Beau Geste Press in Europe through his company Other Books and So, a combination

of gallery, bookshop, press and distributor, based in Amsterdam. Ehrenberg was responsible for Latin America and Mayor responded to requests from individuals and institutions from different locations. Even though the production as a community no longer existed in the second phase, to some extent the partnership with publishers and distributors also entailed a collective work. The benefits of coordinating different schedules and ways of working the various presses included advertising titles to new potential buyers and exchanging experiences and infrastructure.

It is interesting to note that not only publishers of artists' books were associated with Beau Geste Press, but also presses focused on literary works. In fact, the boundaries between these categories were sometimes blurred among those publishers, but the ones mainly involved with artists' editions were the In-Out Centre, Mad Enterprises and Other Books and So in the Netherlands, which were connected to Conceptual, Fluxus and mail art. The British presses tended to be relatively more centred in literature – Aloes Books issued William Burroughs, as well as poems by musicians Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine, and Arc Publications published the British concrete poet Bob Cobbing. This emphasis on literature among the British partners of Beau Geste Press – ranging from the beat generation to concrete poets – brings to mind the magazine *El Corno Emplumado* and suggests that the combination of art and literature was part of the history of Beau Geste Press from its early influences to its last associations.

Apparently personal reasons were decisive in the separation of the Langford Court community in 1974, also leading to the termination of Beau Geste Press nearly two years later. Personal interests, relationships and private circumstances were crucial in mobilizing or interrupting the work, especially as the press was not essentially structured towards profits. Practical and economic factors, however, probably influenced the course of Beau Geste Press. According to its financial records, from January 1973 to January 1974 the expenses increased over 350% (Beau Geste Press, 1971-1974). Mail expenses registered in May 1972 were £4.43, rising to £25.05 in December 1973 (Beau Geste Press, 1971-1974), which probably reflected the growth of the press as well as the inflation at the time. Shortage of material among suppliers was also mentioned in the administrative papers. In late 1975, Mayor described an unfavorable landscape:

"so many galleries and little presses are closing down over here, I think the global economic situation will knock these 'peripheral' art activities (...) Things are difficult in the 70s in a way they weren't in the 60s; Something Else," Fluxus, Beau Geste etc by the score" (Mayor, 10 September, 1975).

Still, the Beau Geste Press archive at Tate Gallery suggests that private life and the publishing activities were inseparable at the press. This is also suggested by the tone of the opening text of *Japanese Schmuck* announcing the end of the Beau Geste Press branch in Britain. A list of "memories" resembling a concrete poem surrounds the central words "eight printing machines" towards which a recollection of past events at the press is arranged. The list includes "the good times," "rain," "dancing," "the children," "the wonderful meal," "the FLUXshoe," "cats in the filing system," "endless music," "christmas," "the ICES train."<sup>12</sup> The Langford Court community is described as four couples – English, Japanese, Mexican and Yorkshire – and two children. Beyond these memories, the present situation is felt as "the continuing compression of freedom" and "the escalation of unpeace." This atmosphere gives the impression that, irrespective of the economic context, the personal involvement with the work conditioned the book production.<sup>13</sup>

The Langford Court period was characterized by the creation of publishing processes other than the conventional ones, which challenged concepts such as authorship, assembly line, editorial control, standardization, and also questioned the distinctions between house versus workplace, private life versus work. The fact that a publishing house, at the time generally perceived as a business and an industrial field, was established at an old farmhouse is itself a symbol of the unusual structure of the first phase of Beau Geste Press. Some of the publications representative of this period are those

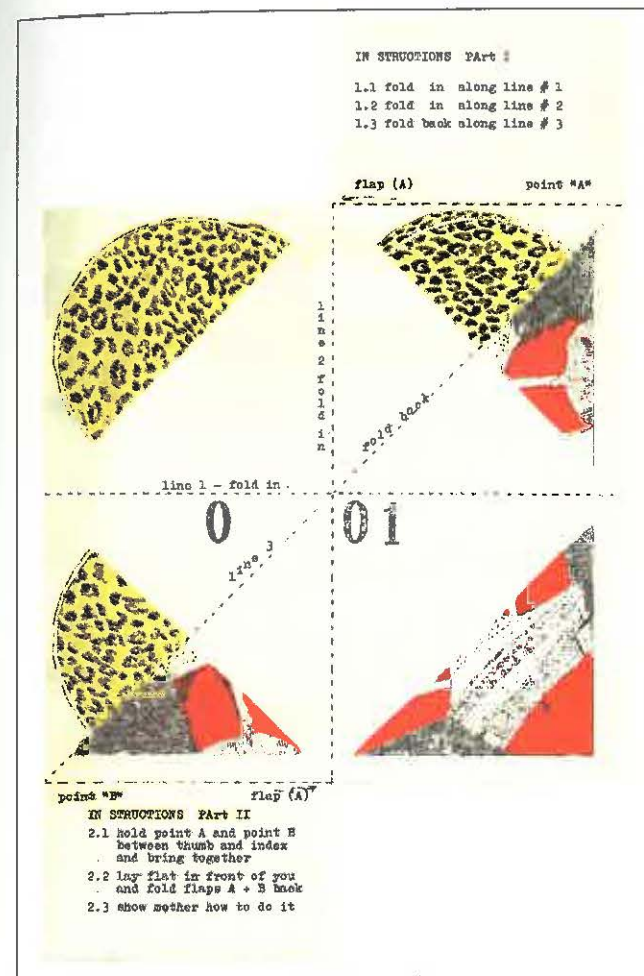


fig 2

*Minimimeofolio* (page)

Felipe Ehrenberg, 1971 - 1972, 20 × 33 cm. Beau Geste Press

Source: Stanford University Libraries

Image reproduced with permission of Felipe Ehrenberg

related to Fluxshoe and the works produced with visiting artists. The international collaborations and distribution were extended throughout the second phase, chiefly through mail correspondence. Typical of the years between 1974 and 1976 were the production of the last *Schmucks*, and the partnership with literary presses in the UK.

#### BEAU GESTE PRESS AND THE ARTIST'S PUBLICATION IN THE 1970S

The Beau Geste Press newsletters, editorial pages and prefaces frequently stated ideals of dissemination and freedom from editorial or artistic intervention. Publishing channels were then perceived to increase the artists' autonomy over their own production, liberating them from the chain of art institutions, dealers, art critics and collectors. In several aspects, the production and circulation of books and periodicals seemed the antithesis of the conventional art system, which valued the single over the multiple, the original over the copy, the individual over the collective. As much as possible, the publications were accessible both in price and distribution. The practice of using publishing channels as a critical strategy in relation to the art world resonates with the general context of artists' books of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This context surfaces in Lucy Lippard's *The Artist's Book Goes Public*, published in 1977. Lippard (1984 [1977] p. 48) defines the

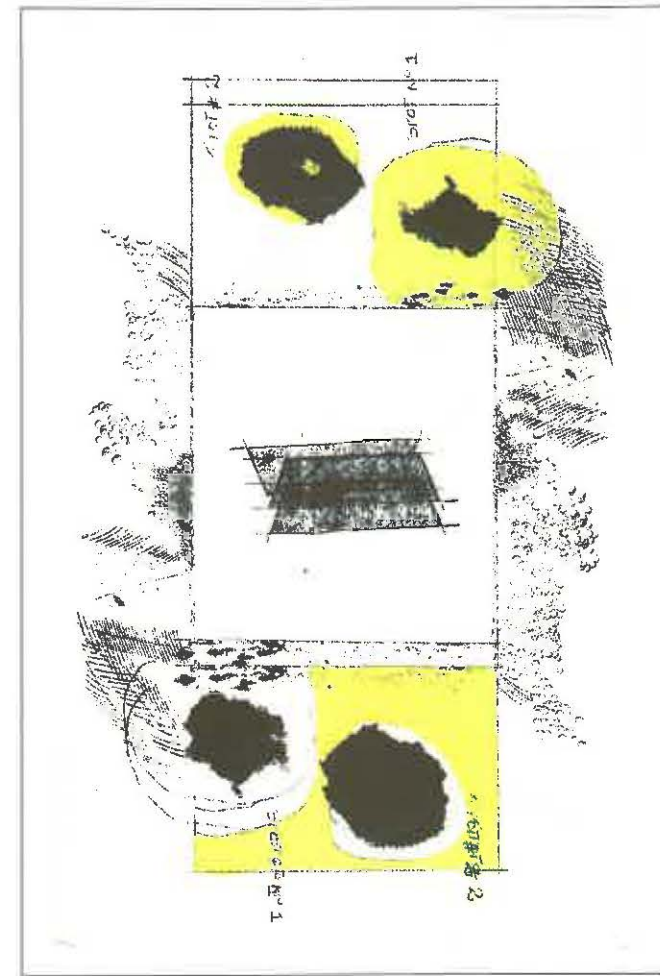


fig 3

*Minimimeofolio* (folded page)

Felipe Ehrenberg, 1971 - 1972, 20 × 33 cm. Beau Geste Press

Source: Stanford University Libraries

Image reproduced with permission of Felipe Ehrenberg

artist's book as "usually inexpensive in price, modest in format and ambitious in scope, being "considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience." Such description applies to most Beau Geste Press editions, whose price, ranging from £ 0.1 to £ 12 (Fisher, Mayor & Ward, 1975), echoes Lippard's emphasis on the democratic nature of artists' books, as opposed to expensive luxury editions. "The expression "goes public" in the title contrasts the notion of private art collections. In an analogous movement, Beau Geste Press frequently advocated the term "dissemination" in the publicity material of the first phase (Ehrenberg 1972a).

The first Beau Geste Press publication, Ehrenberg's book *Minimimeofolio* [fig. 2 - 3], conveys some general principles that were later embodied in other editions. The opening text celebrates the Gestetner mimeograph printer as a symbol of "liberation from all the distribution channels that disseminate communicable work" (Ehrenberg 1972b). At the same time that Ehrenberg implicitly refers to the constraints of the art system – if art is interpreted as a genre of communicable work – he also affirms the possibility of devising the production and distribution of his art:

"you don't know how good it feels (...) to have a whole bunch of the same thing, each with a totally different beauty



of their own radically different from the original proto BECAUSE THERE'S A WHOLE BUNCH OF THEM THERE and the bunch is what has this beauty, or whatever you want to call it; so

the EDITION consists of 14 copies and 2 artist's proofs, grimmmm reminder this of structures past, of the still-necessary-yet thing like speculating with signed copies, limited quantities etc.  
(...)  
it seemed to me that making 14 pieces using a technique that demands at least 200 copies to make it worthwhile underlined the whole ridiculous exquisiteness of "limited editions" and all that. for every item in the collection i discarded over doubled the amount required just proofing. besides, there's a lot of hard-work, as you may have noticed. 16 copies are a pleasure to make. 200 are just too many.

i figure the 8 quid i'm charging is a nice low price (i'm not trying to sell it to you: if you're reading this you're surely the owner already).  
This text frames the specific references to which *Minimimeqfolio* should be compared. Ehrenberg notes that its craftsmanship was incompatible with the large print run of commercial books, while the price was cheaper than a conventional art object. The art world valued the single over the multiple, whereas the publishing world required a multiplicity of copies in order to be profitable. Ehrenberg's book was therefore in the peculiar position of not fully fitting into any of these two systems.

Putting into perspective the extent to which publishing channels can be free, Dan Graham (1999 [1969]) raises the editorial implications of the publishing business, "All magazines in order to survive are forced to present a well-known point of view to identify readers with advertisements," and this includes art magazines, which "depend exclusively for their economic existence on selling ads to galleries for the most part" (1999 [1969] p.93). However, Graham's criticism seems to be directed towards conventional magazines, either specialized in art or not, rather than the art practices that appropriated the publishing channel – such as those done by Graham himself. <sup>15</sup> These questioned commercial and editorial norms through various strategies, and Beau Geste Press belongs to this group.

The opening text of its edition *Documento Trimestral*, a periodical organized and designed by Ehrenberg, issued in 1972, claimed that "el tiraje, necesariamente reducido que se hace a mano, será pago por puritito milagro." ("the printing, necessarily reduced as it was handmade, will be financed by a sheer miracle" (Ehrenberg 1972)). In order to prevent editorial biases, *Schmuck* stated: "to avoid editorial dictatorships each number will be edited, as far as possible, by its contributors" (Fisher, Mayor & Ward, 1975, p. 4). There was a preference for low prices and multiple copies as long as this would not require an industrial production line or an overwhelming amount of labour. The average print run typically ranged from 200 to 500 copies, but this number could vary according to the process and material involved. <sup>16</sup> Moreover, structural mechanisms of publishing such as costs, profits, work, material, technique and technology, were often made visible and the process underlying the edition could be integrated into the work.

Within the discussions on artists' books at the time, Ulises Carrión's ideas were perhaps the ones most closely linked to Beau Geste Press. Throughout the history of the press he collaborated in different functions, issuing two books in Langford Court and later becoming a Beau Geste Press distributor. <sup>17</sup> In his essays *The New Art of Making Books* (1980 [1975]) and *Bookworks Revisited* (1980), he analyzes the physical and sequential nature of the book. "Books exist as objects in an exterior reality, subject to concrete conditions of perception, existence, exchange, consumption, use," he writes (Carrión 1980, p.13). Such concrete structures are intrinsic to bookworks, whereas in a plain book the actual work is generally a text or other relatively autonomous content conveyed in the book.

Whether or not the work was made by an artist is constitutive of an artist's book, which can be a single object rather than a multiple.

This is not the case of bookworks, whose authorship is less relevant and whose work encompasses the entire edition. An example of bookwork is Carrión's *Arguments*, designed and printed by the Beau Geste Press team. The edition was divided into a 'luxury issue,' with copies printed on colorful heavy paper [fig. 4], and 'plain issue' printed on white lower weight paper. The typographic arrangement on a page surface, the sequence of pages and the sequence of plain or luxury copies create rhythms and works that rely on the book structure and represent Carrión's commitment to structuralism in the broader sense.

The affinity between Carrión's ideas and Beau Geste Press' publications is reflected in his selection of examples of Beau Geste Press books *Door to Door* and *Lessons* for the lecture that originated the essay *Bookworks Revisited*. <sup>18</sup> Likewise, the magazine *Schmuck* was part of an exhibition whose catalogue featured Carrión's essay *From Bookworks to Mailworks*, published in 1978. Connecting artists' books and the rise of mail art, Carrión (1980 [1978], p.27) writes:

"I, among others, think that one of the decisive factors for the world-wide proliferation of artists' books (and of artists' books shows) was their ability to be distributed by means of the mail. It is not surprising then that, in some cases, the two activities would merge together to produce works belonging to both 'genres'."

At Beau Geste Press this combination was facilitated by the fact that David Mayor and Felipe Ehrenberg were both involved with mail art, <sup>19</sup> hence perhaps the central importance to the distribution and collaboration via mail at the press.

The international presence of Beau Geste Press and, above all, its operation beyond the notion of art centres and peripheries were probably propelled by its articulation of printing, mailing and publishing. The circulation of artworks via the mail and publishing systems could trigger or strengthen artists' networks irrespective of geographical or cultural boundaries, challenging existing hierarchical relations:

"It's not enough to confirm that the work doesn't acknowledge spatial limits any more. This has practical consequences of great importance. An artist doesn't need to live in an 'art-capital' to have his voice heard and as a matter of fact there are centres of Mail Art activity in places where there are no art galleries but only a modest post-office." (Carrión, 1978, p.30)

It is interesting to note that Carrión does not think that previously established artists' networks led to an exchange of mail art and artists' books. Instead, he reverses this cause and effect relation, arguing that the mailwork and bookwork promoted far-reaching networks that ultimately questioned the traditional division of centre and periphery.

Additionally, such works could blur the distinction between author and contributor. Published mailworks such as assembling magazines – whose pages were created, printed and mailed by artists from different locations, being finally assembled by an organizer – could be interpreted both as collective works and as artworks whose author is the person that conceived the project (Carrión 1978, p. 29). This process was similar to that of *Schmuck*. However Beau Geste Press also printed the magazine, which is probably the reason why Carrión did not classify it as an assembling edition.

An essential characteristic of Beau Geste Press thus emerges: the printing process and the material qualities associated with it tended to be assimilated into the work. Hence the detailed description of the mimeograph technique in Ehrenberg's text of *Documento Trimestral*, including how colors, papers and images could be used.

"sus hojas seran mimeografadas cuidadosamente por una gestetner 300, explorando al mismo tiempo las posibilidades que ofrece dicho medio, tan usado en oficinas y revoluciones y menospreciado por demás" (Ehrenberg 1972). ("its sheets will be carefully mimeographed on a Gestetner 300, exploring the possibilities of this medium, so widespread in offices and revolutions and so disdained elsewhere").

These considerations contrast with the relative neutrality of the assembling editions, whose organizers commonly let each printed page be thoroughly controlled or overseen by its creator. This passage

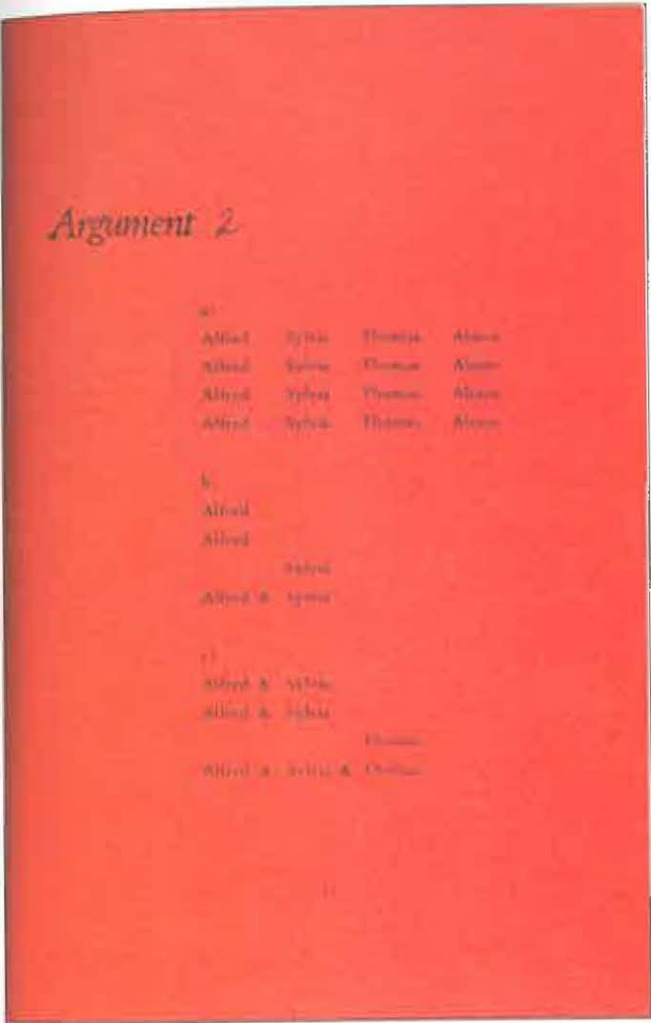
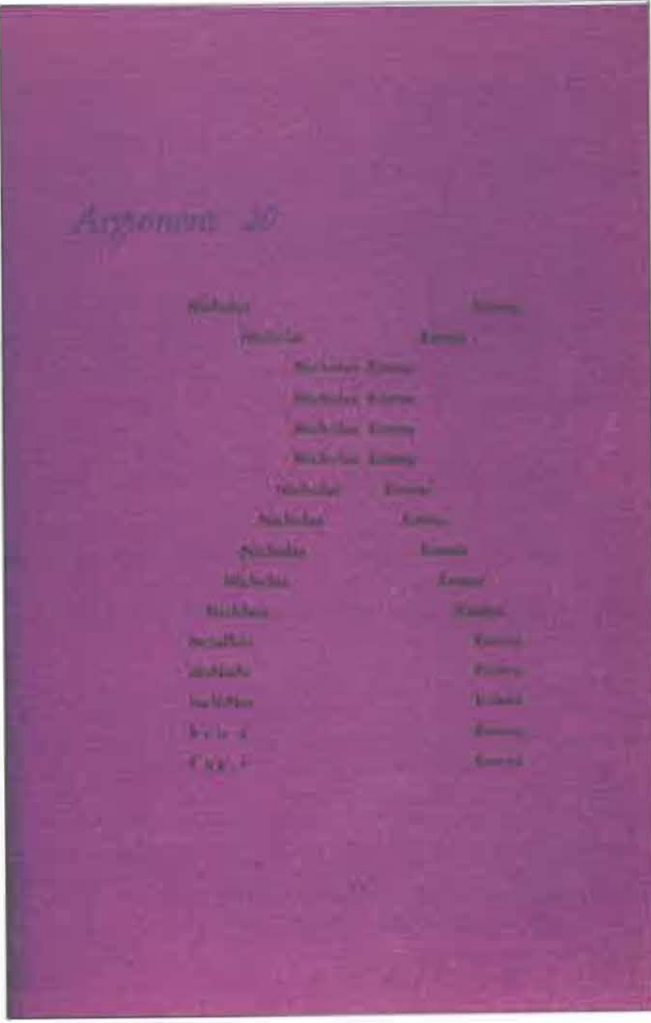


Fig 4  
*Arguments* (spread). 'Luxury Issue.'  
Ulises Carrión. Designed by Beau Geste community, typeset by Terry Wright, layout and paste-up by David Mayor, printed offset by Felipe Ehrenberg. 1973. 15.3 × 20.5 cm. 87 pg. Beau Geste Press.  
Source: Stanford University Libraries. Image reproduced with permission of Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion.

from *Documento Trimestral* also marks a difference in relation to Dan Graham (1999 [1969] p. 94), for whom the work lies in the artist's position or idea, being its material presentation as a necessary but collateral residue.

While Beau Geste Press ideals such as low price and availability were shared by other publishers of artists' books in the 1970s, there was not a consensus at the time on the role of the printing process in the edition. It could be embodied in the published artwork or not. Given the production and distribution within a significantly international group of readers and contributors, how was the printing process articulated at Beau Geste Press? To what extent was it intrinsic to the works generated outside the Beau Geste Press community? What happened to concepts such as authorship and original work when the publishing channel and art world converged?



THE BEAU GESTE PRESS PUBLISHING PROCESS

Several ways of editing, producing and distributing were possible at Beau Geste Press. On some occasions, devising unusual forms of publishing seems to have been a priority rather than a subordinate activity. Depending on how the production and circulation were organized, the audience could relate to the publication in different ways, and distinctions between author, craftsman, distributor, reader and publisher could become relatively blurred in the Beau Geste Press publishing process. The fact that the publishing chain did not necessarily follow one specific pattern is representative of the contrast between Beau Geste Press and a conventional publishing house.

The printing techniques, initially mimeograph but later extended to offset and letterpress, are emblematic of the variety of methods used at the press. The publications also varied in size, shape, concept – David Mayor's *Microgames: Gong, Spiral, Phrozen Phosphorus*, produced in 1972, consists of matchbooks containing different objects, whereas Woody Haut's *The Cartographers*, issued in 1973, is a poetry book in a classical octavo format, printed in letterpress and designed by Terry Wright. Experimentation with formats, inserts, papercutting and color were frequent, but the works tended not to be too far away from the book structure. This was probably for both practical and conceptual reasons. If the edition were, for example, breakable or



too heavy, its international mail distribution would be more difficult. And from the conceptual perspective, creating what Carrión would call “bookworks” and “mailworks” – works whose intrinsic elements include the book structure and the mail system – was probably an artistic and editorial choice.

While the elemental book structure was recognizable in several editions, the greatest ingenuity was sometimes in the publishing process rather than the published object. An example is *The Thomas Alva Edison Centenary Issue Commemorating the ICES-72 Brain Drain Music Train* (1972), created and distributed on a train journey [fig. 5]. Passengers of a London-Edinburgh-London train were given art supplies as well as papers with designated areas where they produced drawings, texts and collages. Beau Geste Press printed and assembled this material in Edinburgh, selling it during the travel back (Ehrenberg et al., 1972; David Mayor, personal communication, 13 Sep 2016).

The result was an unbound edition – the pages were put together in an envelope – of 116 pages and 120 copies. Apparently it circulated mainly among the passengers, as it was not for sale in the 1975 Beau Geste catalogue (Fisher, Mayor & Ward, 1975). Since the group of passengers purchased the copies, they were both ‘authors’ and ‘readers.’ The publication was ultimately a collective place where their works were exchanged, but it is actually unclear if the work consisted of the assembled printed pages, or the experience of making the material on a train journey, or both. But if on the one hand the passengers were presumably the authors, it can also be argued that Beau Geste Press, having conceived the project, was an author. Probably the point was that it did not really matter who was the author. The impact of the mimeograph printing is relevant in this book, as it converted the heterogeneous pre-publication originals into a homogeneous edition, thereby working as an element of graphic translation of dissimilar techniques. The repetition of square frames on the pages, which designated the areas for artworks and texts and probably previously prepared at Beau Geste Press, also creates a sense of continuous structure.

*Wayward Action!*, issued in 1973, is another title that restructured the publishing chain. The book shows a series of documents that testify to the barriers against the transmission on TV of a video created by film maker Mike Leggett. Leggett assembled newspaper articles, letters that he received from media professionals, and his own texts and notes. He is not referred to as the author, and was possibly involved in the printing of the book, as it is stated that *Wayward Action!* was “compiled by Mike Leggett and printed under the guidance of El Maestro, Felipe Ehrenberg with the help of the company at the Beau Geste Press, Langford Court.” Again, the mimeograph printing works as a visual element, giving consistency to a book whose originals were from different sources and genres.

The list of contributors included persons who “wittingly and unwittingly” generated the content such as the media professionals whose letters were reproduced. On the back cover the reader was asked to either forward the book or return it to the publishers for re-circulation, working therefore as distributor. *Wayward Action!* was not for sale in the 1975 Beau Geste Press catalogue, maybe because it was meant to circulate in a specific context, or because it was out of print, or because it was free.

The publishing chain is therefore shuffled: the idea of authorship is questioned, the notion of author being replaced by ‘compiler,’ the contributors (more or less ‘authors’) are almost accidental; the compiler, who would traditionally be considered the author, was possibly a printer and producer; the reader was potentially a distributor.

At the same time that Beau Geste Press opposed editorial interferences, it was also established that the craftsmanship and technology entailed in the production process would be part of the published artwork. This is suggested in the general guidelines of *Japanese Schmuck*:

“whatever we receive (texts, manuscripts, photos etc) will be included, if technically possible. However, please remember that we cannot afford, for instance, to print full color photos (...). The page size of the magazine is 21.0 x 29.7 cm. Fold-outs on other sizes of paper (not too big) are possible though”

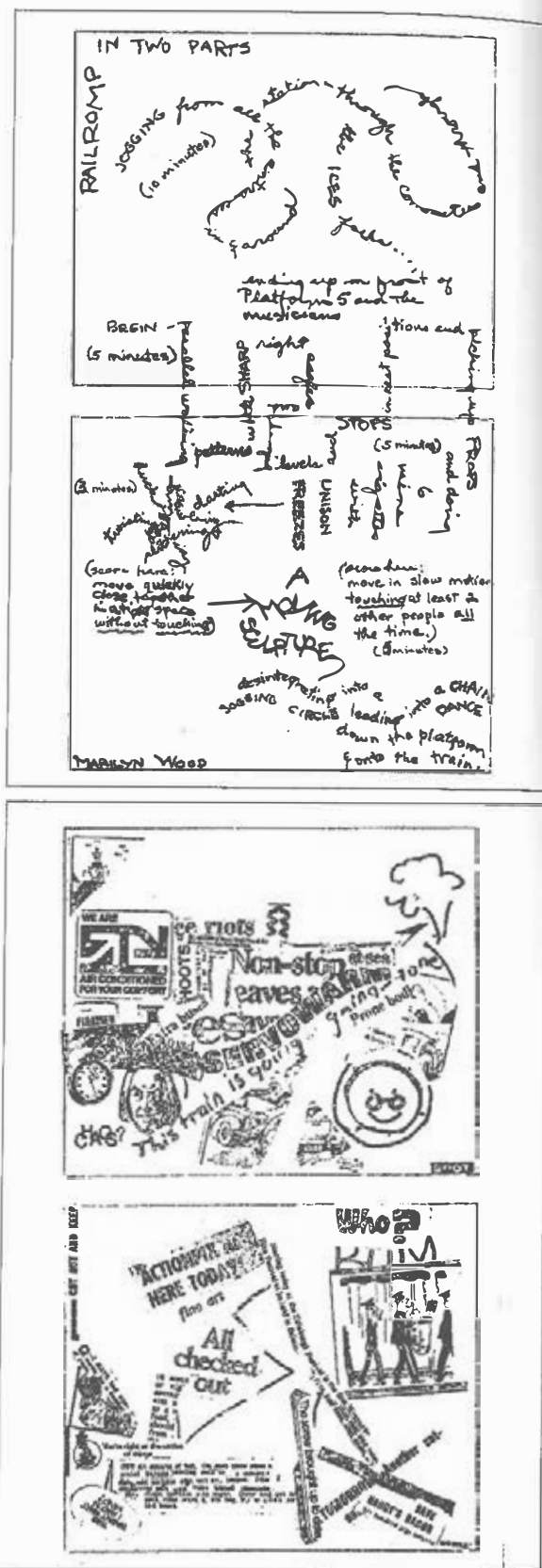


Fig 5  
The Thomas Alva Edison centenary issue commemorating the ICES-72 Brain Drain Music Train (pages) (1972). Ehrenberg et. al.  
Top: page by Marilyn Wood.  
Bottom: not signed. Beau Geste Press.  
Source: Stanford University Libraries.  
Image reproduced with permission of Felipe Ehrenberg.

(Mayor, 1972).

Another passage recommended that the artists treat their collaboration on *Schmuck* more as printed matter than as self-contained artworks:

“if you would like to have 2-colour work reproduced, the best thing would be for you to send us two originals, one with the bits to be printed in black, the other to be done in another colour (with mimeo, we usually use yellow, magenta or a combination of these, or lilac)” (Mayor, 1972).

It was thus explained that the printing and binding stages could add new elements to the work. However, the specific relationship between the publisher and the artist authorized such variations.

Very often the dialogue between the press and its contributors apparently had a similar collaborative tone. A statement sent by David Mayor to the New York Book Fair concisely elucidates the Beau Geste Press publishing process: “we are not strictly publishers, we operate by producing WITH<sup>20</sup> artists, not for them, and mostly in our own workshop. More ‘art’ than ‘poetry’” (Mayor, 30 Mar 1974). Since publishers and artists were working together, an original pre-publication material made by the artist was not the actual work, of which the copies would be a subordinate version. Besides, even taking the whole edition as the work, neither the artist or the press controlled it entirely. Hierarchies between original and copy, or author and printer, were therefore suspended and the printing process was supposed to be integrated into the work, whether or not the contributor directly participated in it.

While archives of conventional publishing houses tend to indicate systematic divisions of work with correlated wages, the Beau Geste Press archive apparently lacks this kind of information. This is not surprising considering the organization of Langford Court as a community of artisans: “community” suggests all-embracing participation and “artisan” implies that the production would not follow the framework of industrial labour. In the correspondence between Ehrenberg and Mayor, there is a certain detachment and jokey tone when they used expressions related to business – Mayor preferred to write “biznis” instead – and it is possible to grasp their reluctance in treating Beau Geste Press as a commercial activity.

Despite the relatively fluid structure of the press, the printing office was coordinated by Ehrenberg, who shared with Mayor a function analogous to that of a publisher. But unlike a traditional publishing chain, the roles here often overlapped, hence one person could be printer, designer, author, distributor. To some extent this fits Ramanathan’s (2007) description of British small presses at the time, whose publishers could be also the printers and whose functions were not rigidly divided. The key difference is that in Beau Geste Press’ bookworks and mailworks these production and distribution systems were commonly embodied in the creative process.

The press certainly needed to be economically viable in spite of the unwillingness to prioritize profits. It was maintained through book sales and occasional grants from the Arts Council of Great Britain, although both Mayor and Ehrenberg preferred to keep it independent from public funding, probably in order to guarantee artistic and editorial freedom (Mayor, Sept 1974).

The specific publishing process of Beau Geste Press becomes clearer when it is compared to publishers of non-artists’ books. An example of how book production is generally supposed to work is Robert Darnton’s (1982) *Communication Circuit*, which accompanied his essay “What is the History of Books?” In spite of some details not applicable to the 20th century context,<sup>21</sup> the diagram typifies the sequential process of conceiving, producing, delivering, selling and reading. Political and economic circumstances are determinant forces around which the whole system seems to orbit.

In Darnton’s model, the only elements whose interaction is mutual are the author and the publisher.<sup>22</sup> Their top central position and the single, continuous way pointed by the arrows, illustrate a publishing system centred in authorship and business. The whole chain is meant to convert the writer’s work into a social article, while ideally generating profits.<sup>23</sup>

If an analogous chart were outlined for the Beau Geste Press publishing process, it would likely look as a series of reciprocal connections between contributors, printers, audience, and

distributors. In the event that the author was not altogether absent, she or he would probably not be at the top centre. Alternatively, it is possible to regard the entire Beau Geste Press publishing chain as an art medium on its own, not subject to be retained on a diagram due to its malleable and changeable nature. Perhaps the Beau Geste Press publishing process can be better represented by analogy with playing cards, whose position or function depends on what game the participants decide to play.

Even though the *Communication Circuit* was conceived for book production prior to the 20th century, a period of relative craftsmanship if compared to the later industry, it still contrasts to the organization of a 1970s artists’ books publishing house self-defined as a group of ‘craftsmen’ (Wright 1973). This means that it is not only the lesser or greater degree of craftsmanship that grounded Beau Geste Press, but also the interchangeable role of the readers, printers, and authors. A broader tendency to remodel the communication chain, which Barthes (1967) defined as the death of the author and the correlated birth of the reader, was also present in other published artworks at the time, which therefore do not fit the conventional pattern outlined in the *Communication Circuit*.

Following twenty-five years of the publication of “What is the History of Books?”, Darnton (2007, p. 502) wrote: “every once in a while I receive a copy of another model that someone has proposed to substitute for mine. The pile of diagrams has reached an impressive height.” The text continues: “there may be a limit to the usefulness of a debate about how to place boxes in different positions, provide them with appropriate labels, and connect them with arrows pointed in one direction or another” (Darnton, 2007, p. 505). Yet he does see an improvement over his own model in the chart designed by Thomas Adams and Nicholas Barker, published in 1993. Although generally working in the same framework as Darnton, Adams and Barker argued that the *Communication Circuit* lacked the stage subsequent to the first circulation, when the book is preserved in libraries and archives, and possible new editions emerge if it is seen as worth reissuing. Adams and Barker named this stage “survival,” indicating the difference between the books that reach new generations of readers and those that disappear.

The term “survival” is not totally applicable to the Beau Geste Press editions, given that sometimes the work was not intended to last, but to circulate instead. However, the elements cited by Adams and Barker were indeed constitutive of the Beau Geste Press publishing process, whose list of regular buyers included libraries, museums, galleries and universities, both of the United Kingdom and abroad (Beau Geste Press, 1972-1976). These institutions were not only customers, but could also be spaces for the publications to be exhibited, sold, and ultimately preserved. The criticism against the art system did not literally mean opposing the places and institutions that maintain and exhibit art.<sup>24</sup>

It may seem paradoxical that the editions were eventually absorbed by the museum and gallery system, but this can also be interpreted as a sign of how complex is the connection between a 1970s artists’ book press and the art and the publishing worlds. By claiming that the book was “the easiest way out of the art world,” Lippard (1986 [1977]) stressed the contrasting implications of producing an entire book edition or an art object instead. Depending on the artist’s decision to issue a book or make a painting, how will the work be exchanged, valued, or used? Who will benefit from it? The point was which social and economic structures the circulation of artworks comply with. The fact that museums and galleries were regular buyers of Beau Geste Press editions is indicative of the art institutions’ movement towards incorporating the artist’s book, but it does not attest that this assimilation was – or has been – easy.

Debroise and Medina (2007, p. 158) argue that Beau Geste Press aimed to “achieve an economic and cultural space completely independent of official and commercial circuits,” thereby suggesting that the press was detached from artistic and publishing institutions. Yet Beau Geste Press operated in connection with publishing houses, associations of publishers, museums, galleries, cultural institutions, universities and art groups. Rather than moving away from the art and publishing sphere, the editions happened within these two worlds, rearranging their mechanisms and stretching their boundaries.



## RETROSPECTIVE ACCESS TO BEAU GESTE PUBLICATIONS

Once the first cycle of book production and circulation is over, remaining copies are held in libraries and archives, the work is possibly reedited, and the phase named by Adams and Barker (1993) as 'survival' stage begins. Artists' books can additionally follow the re-circulation cycles of the art context and thus go to museums, exhibitions, art fairs, private collections, and in theory they can be perpetually resold in the art market. When Beau Geste Press editions reach this stage, individual authorship tends to be emphasized and the process of collaboration tends to be missed. The author is lifted to a position comparable to the top centre place occupied in the *Communication Circuit*, with the key difference that at this point the books and magazines shift away from the publishing sphere and towards the art sphere.

Several factors probably contribute to this shift, such as the scarce number of copies, the nature of the publications and the historiography of the press. The print run at Beau Geste Press seldom surpassed 500 copies and an edition, once out of print, most likely would not be reissued – only four out of seventy-five titles were reprinted at the press (*Japanese Schmuck* 1976). Therefore it would become increasingly difficult to find an 'authentic' copy throughout the decades. And unlike other published artworks at the time, whose material embodiment was a necessary but collateral aspect, at Beau Geste Press the presentation of the work, the physical qualities related to printing techniques, the chance elements, and any other irretrievable circumstance of production were integral to the edition.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that Beau Geste Press archives are held at art institutions, such as Tate in London and Centro de Documentación Arkeia in Mexico, is in itself indicative of this shift towards the art sphere, although institutions not necessarily focused on art also own Beau Geste Press collections. The presence of the press in the art sphere is also reinforced via analyses of Beau Geste Press' significance within the late 20th century art, such as Gilbert's (2012) essay "Something unnameable in common" – translocal collaboration at the Beau Geste Press and Debroise and Medina's (2007) exhibition catalogue *The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico 1968-1997*.

However, while the Beau Geste Press editions indeed had a dialogue with the art world and were part of it, the art discourse tends to re-emphasize the original and the author that were once diluted in the publishing process. Where does the actual artwork of a published work reside? Whereas the publishing world would likely see literature as the art germane to books and answer that the artwork is in the verbal content, the art world seems to be inclined to see the original pre-publication material as the actual art. Hence the practice of reproducing and crediting it as the actual work, pointed out by Blacksell (2013).

In addition, some archival art institutions, willing to protect the published copy from possible damages caused by photographing or scanning it, let only the pre-publication material be reproduced.<sup>26</sup> If there is an original artwork, it replaces the book. As a result, the intrinsic elements of publishing that once characterized the bookwork are likely to be missed in the art discourse. If there is no pre-publication material, the book is converted into a rare physical presence, visible only to those with access to the archive, describable only in words and reconstructed in the imagination of those that listened to these words or read them, more as a legend than as a book. Also, as the publishing process is over, a collectively created edition is often cited as one author's work. The art context thus gives the impression to unwittingly retain its old frameworks of the traditional circulation of single art objects.

Phillipot (2013 [1993]) locates 'book art' in the intersection between art, publishing, and multiple. From the archival standpoint, this indicates what kind of material is a Beau Geste Press publication, in which context it will probably be reused, and what are the best way to access a copy. This location is also a reminder that the 'art' element of 'book art' tends to be valued in the preservation stage, as the copies become more rare. In order to protect the published work, access to it in museum libraries is then controlled, and the fact that the book is an object, subject to be lost or damaged, prevails over the process initially

emphasized in the first cycle of production and circulation.

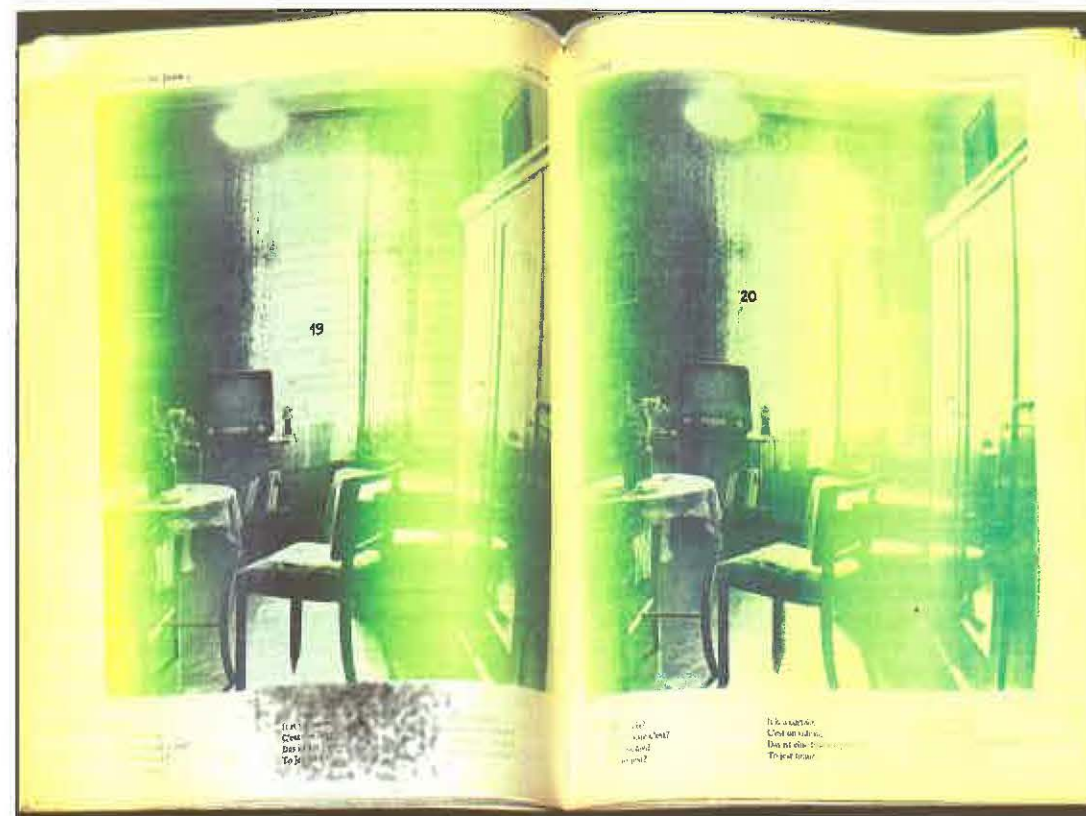
This restriction represents a barrier between the audience and the work, whose interconnections in the Beau Geste Press publishing process were more flexible and fluid. The inescapable restriction of access to the few copies also tends to minimize the dissemination and distribution once devised by the press. As Williamson (2012, p.2) points out, "national collections of artist books are largely inaccessible to the majority of their potential users." It can additionally be claimed that the audiences and reading experiences of the first cycle of circulation cannot be replicated in the preservation stage. However, in the case of published artworks structured towards going public, their original meaning becomes particularly difficult to grasp when they are held away from the public's sight.

Digitizing a print-based artist's book is to substitute its very art medium, and Beau Geste Press bookworks cease to be so when they are recorded in a digital version. Yet as this version potentially facilitates and broadens the access to the edition, to some extent the loss in terms of physical book is counterbalanced by a gain in dissemination and process.<sup>27</sup> A print-based book that is digitally accessible in culturally and geographically varied places can more approximately translate artworks such as the Beau Geste Press editions, which questioned the boundaries between art centres and peripheries.

The fact that the Beau Geste Press publishing process did not fit the schematic models of conventional publishing means its artists' books challenged the publishing frameworks as well as the art world. In the initial cycle of production and circulation, the publishing process conceived at the press was relevant. The printed copies worked as a strategy for dissemination, towards a public art space not achievable through conventional artworks. The Beau Geste Press editions tended to emphasize the physical book structure, but sometimes they could be meant to circulate rather than to be owned. In the subsequent stage of preservation and retrieval, the published copies became rare objects which the art sphere is able to safeguard – yet to the detriment of the public space that was built in the publishing sphere.

Mila Waldeck is a PhD student in the department of Typography and Graphic Communication at the University of Reading. Former art director of *Vogue* (Brazilian edition), her research interests include 1960-70s artists' books, popular communication and national identity in design. She has been a speaker at conferences such as ICDHS (International Conference on Design History and Design Studies) Taiwan, ICDHS Portugal and TypeCon Washington, and has worked as a visiting lecturer at Appalachian State University in North Carolina.

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*General Schmuck*. Magazine spread by Jarosław Kozłowski. *General Schmuck* was compiled and arranged by Felipe Ehrenberg and David Mayor. Layout work and platemaking completed by David Mayor. Printed and bound by Takako Saito. 1975. 21 × 29,5 cm. Beau Geste Press. Source: The British Library. Image courtesy of Matt's Gallery and Jarosław Kozłowski.



ENDNOTES

1. This number was stated in *Japanese Schmuck* (Ehrenberg, F., Mayor, D., Taii Ashizawa and Takehisa Kosugi 1976) and also estimated by David Mayor in a letter to Clive Phillpot (Mayor 4 Nov 1979). According to Debroise and Medina (2007 p. 172), the press published more than 150 artists' books.

2. Ehrenberg explains that he named the Gestetner duplicator Beau Geste, "following an old and quaint Mexican tradition of naming your machines (like naming a boat)" (Felipe Ehrenberg, personal communication, 10 Sep 2016).

3. The publication date of Beau Geste Press editions at the Tate Library Collection, Getty Research Institute and Stanford University Libraries typically ranges from 1971 to 1976. The editorial of *Japanese Schmuck* declared that Beau Geste Press focus was shifting to Mexico in 1976. The editions *Testimonios de Latinoamérica*, issued in 1978, and *Expediente: Bienal X – La historia documentada de un complot frustrado*, issued in 1980, were published in Mexico under the imprint Libro Acción Libre / Beau Geste Press.

4. Felipe Ehrenberg and David Mayor frequently used only lowercase, sometimes typing uppercase words for emphasis. It is used here to preserve their style.

5. On 2 October 1968, approximately two hundred persons were killed during protests at the Plaza of Three Cultures at Tlatelolco, in Mexico City (Rostow, 1968, p. 6). President Díaz Ordaz ordered the massacre in response to the escalating students' movement.

6. Ehrenberg was an experienced graphic artist and printer in Mexico. In addition, Conwell (2010 p. 191) states that before settling in England "he also collaborated with the New York Graphic Workshop, a printmaking workshop founded by Liliana Porter and Luis Camnitzer."

7. Chris Welch and Madeleine Gallard were leaving Langford Court around this period.

8. The proportion of books authored by the Beau Geste Press team seems to be nearly one third.

9. A Latin American edition of *Schmuck* was planned in 1973 and published in Mexico as *Testimonios de Latinoamérica* in 1978 (Ehrenberg 2013 [1978]).

10. Martha Hellion moved to Amsterdam, having since then worked both as a book artist and curator; Terry Wright established a press in Somerset (Conwell 2010).

11. The publishing house Something Else Press, founded by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins and active from 1963 to 1974.

12. The ICES train is a reference to *ICES - 72: International Carnival of Experimental Sound*, an event held at The Roundhouse in London in 1972. The Beau Geste Press edition *The Thomas Alva Edison Centenary Issue Commemorating the ICES-72 Brain Drain Music Train*, made in 1972, was produced during a train journey linked to the festival. "It was printed using a mimeo machine in Edinburgh, and then distributed to people on the train on the way back" (David Mayor, personal communication, 13 Sep 2016).

13. Ehrenberg established collective community presses in Mexico while carrying on his own art practice; Mayor became a practitioner, researcher and writer on electroacupuncture.

14. Lippard (1977 p.52), however, stresses the difference between being democratic in price and in content: "One of the basic mistakes made by early proponents of Conceptual Art's "democratic" stance (myself included) was a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience). Yet the most important aspect of artists' books is their adaptability as instruments for extension to a far broader public than that currently enjoyed by contemporary art."

15. Graham's works "Figurative," published in 1968 in *Harper's Bazaar*, and "Homes for America," first published in *Arts Magazine* in the December-January 1966-67 issue, are some examples.

16. The print run of *Si Sabes Ver*, by Myra Landau, was 1000 copies, and of *Me Ben I Sign*, by Ben Vautier, was 950 copies.

17. Martha Hellion has an enduring connection with Carrión, becoming his curator and one of the main disseminators of his work. She is one of the authors of the books *Ulises Carrión - Artist's Books and Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies* (2004) and *Gossip*,

*Scandal and Good Manners: Works by Ulises Carrión* (2010), which accompanied exhibitions of his works also curated by her.

18. *Bookworks Revisited* accompanied Carrión's talk in the conference Options in Independent Art Publishing, in Rochester, New York, in 1979. A new version of it was published as an essay in *The Print Collector Newsletter* in 1980 and republished in *Second Thoughts*, a collection of Carrión's essays issued in 1980.

19. Mayor was a prolific mail artist in the 1970s. His extensive archive is held at the Tate Gallery Archive with the Beau Geste Press and Fluxshoe collection. In 1970, Ehrenberg created the mail artwork *Arriba y Adelante*, recreated in 2011 for the exhibition *Intimate Bureaucracies: Art and the Mail*, at the University of Essex (U.K.), curated by Zanna Gilbert.

20. In capital letters in the original.

21. For example, Darnton alludes to vellum and cites papyrus as supply material for printers. The binder is in a position consistent with the commerce of unbound books, not typical in the 20th century.

22. Binders and readers are also mutually related in the chart, but their position fits better the earlier book production than the 20th century processes.

23. Darnton (2007, p. 498) remarks that publishers "had to coordinate a variety of interrelated activities so that, when stock was taken and the accounts were balanced, they would have a profit."

24. Both Mayor and Ehrenberg seem conscious of the book's life after the first cycle of production and circulation, and concerned with how the work could be used and understood in this subsequent stage. Mayor transferred his extensive archive of Beau Geste Press, Fluxshoe and mail art to the Tate Gallery Archive, and Ehrenberg's collections are held at Stanford University and Centro de Documentación Arkheia at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Ehrenberg (2013) writes: "I never questioned the need to create a file (. . .). One of the reasons why I decided to deal with Stanford, apart from the splendidly careful and respectful way it stores knowledge (. . .), was the fact that the file would be in California, not far from Mexico, at hand in case any Mexican scholar or researcher might eventually show an interest in exploring it."

25. This contrasts, for example, with the editions organized by Seth Siegelau (1999 [1969] p.200), for whom "the presentation of the work is not to be confused with the work itself"

26. Apparently that was the case of a reproduction of *Aktual Schmuck* in Gilbert's (2012, p. 59) essay "Something Unnameable in Common" Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press, credited as a page of the magazine but which seems to be the original pre-publication material held at the Tate Archive. The current policy of the Tate Archive is to favour the reproduction of the original over the copy.

27. Melvin (2013) cites Primary Information as an initiative that broadens the access to otherwise unavailable artists' editions. In addition to issuing reprints at low cost, it also digitalizes editions that can be downloaded for free.

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