"Books are filthy, dirty things!": An Interview with Jo Cook

Guinevere Pencarrick

There should be a genre: collabo-core. That's me and Jo Cook, of Perro Verlag press on Mayne Island, BC. Even after a five- or seven-year hiatus, it takes us about two minutes of being around each other before the scissors and glue are out and we're starting on a collage (even when, like now, we're supposed to be doing an interview). We both have kind of a reverse Midas touch that way. It's just who we are.

Jo and I are good friends. We met over ten years ago at an art collective and started collaborating immediately. We love talking to each other and can gab for hours. So when I was asked to interview her, it felt like I'd been handed a bunch of firecrackers and told I'm allowed on the roof. The next day I actually opened a fortune cookie that said: "a tempting project will soon present itself to you."

There isn't a form on this planet that a renegade publishing house and a nut like me wouldn't turn on its head, and The Interview is no exception. Ours started out as an image collage, and then we hacked up all our written/transcribed material and again used collage to reassemble it. Then all that became a script. But then we knocked it back into an interview. And so you'd never even know that it had ever been anything else.

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Guinevere Pencarrick: Jo, you and I have done a lot of drawing together and you've brought a crazy number of artists in on joint projects. Perro Verlag is like a vast dinner table with people coming and going, talking and making art on interdimensional napkins. I can't interview you as a single individual—what you do and who you are is so much bigger than the little tangle of being one person.

Jo Cook: The interview is definitely a difficult structure to get at what we do. For every book I've published there is a story, which means there are more than a hundred stories, many of them now out of print. Why talk about one rather than another? Each publication is important to me. I'm also an interviewee who has been paralyzed by direct questions her entire life! But the dinner table metaphor is a good one. That's what Perro Verlag feels like to me, too. My partner Wesley Mulvin and I live on this island and friends come from the mainland to stay for a few days to work with the letterpress. After a day in the print shop, there are late nights sitting around the kitchen table where we plot new work or simply make plans to change the world. The collaborative process is the backbone of Perro Verlag.

GP: This interview is necessarily a collage, then. We can chart your life, your understanding of things, your work, and this would arrive at *The Capilano Review* as a quilt, collage, or zine.

JC: Collage really is the thing, because Perro Verlag has no particular "brand." In 2009 we were given one of our letterpresses by the Vancouver Island School of Art and we purchased another press for next

to nothing. Several print shops that were going out of business were willing to give us their drawers of lead type if we agreed to take everything off their hands. So we did. We never set out with a fixed aesthetic or idea of which font was good or bad, elegant or crude. In the Typography (capital-T) world there are a lot of opinions. It's a bit of a judgmental trade. We decided to ignore that part. We did our best and we experimented. We followed our interest in collage by combining fonts we'd been given and used them on book covers and postcards and posters. This is how our "house style," or whatever you want to call it, became Perro Verlag.

GP: You have made zines with people of all ages from all kinds of different locations—geographically, intellectually—and it always works. It never enters the art-therapy realm, it always has amazing design quality, and the content is always spellbinding. The space you provide allows people to be truly interesting and to access parts of themselves that it is exciting to share, that people want to see. What is it that you do that creates an environment where anyone can be an artist?

JC: After moving to Mayne Island in 1990, I spent ten years more or less as a hermit. I worked in a six-by-ten-foot studio every day, all day. I made weekly trips to the UBC library and took out as many books as I could fit in my backpack. I wasn't lonely but I was grieving the loss of friendships that I'd had in Vancouver. Many close friends moved on to have academic and business careers. I was staining decks and painting houses for people on the island and studying poetry and drawing. It was an intense solitary time that I am grateful for. But at the time it was hard.

I'm happy to be working collaboratively much more now. But to answer your question, I don't do anything except open the doors and get ready to work.

GP: Same with the kind of community art programming I tend to co-run; we provide space for people's agency first, meanwhile indicating that support is present.

There's a real fear about making art (artists have it too) and that has to be broken down by collective acknowledgment that there are scary thresholds to cross. That was especially true years ago when I taught a weekly painting class at the Gathering Place Community Centre, which serves low-income and marginalized people. Participants would literally hover at the door insisting they weren't painters, worrying about coming in. That's how strong the fear is in our culture. People don't feel legitimate, entitled to make art. So I emitted a "tempting project" vibe and coaxed them into the space. And then people would make such wonderful paintings and we'd have such great conversations. If that's outsider art then I never want to be indoors.

Perro Verlag is unfettered from some of the funding nightmares that haunt other collectives. Jo, you really do self-publish or perish. And the great big human rambling that comes out of that has an exquisite freedom. Lo-Fi is also an aesthetic choice. Let's talk about all that.

JC: Well, after a couple of failed applications I decided to feel relieved by the lack of approval from the funding bodies. I chose to embrace the unfunded status as something that gave Perro Verlag

a different kind of credibility. I had the freedom to do and say whatever without having to justify it in a language I wasn't interested in mastering. The print runs for the publications can be large or small. And the number of books in a print run has nothing to do with legitimizing what I do. Deadlines are of my own and/or the artists' own making. They are flexible; they can wiggle. Decisions about what direction to take and how to do something are not guided by someone else's criteria. Mistakes are disappointing but often they can identify new ways of approaching the task at hand.

GP: That's why I consider Perro Verlag to be a renegade publishing house. So much of its value comes from the strength of your position here. "Unfunded status" sounds super grand to me. It sounds like a great escape, like a 1930s' bank robbery.

In a similar vein, you and I have discussed Errol Morris and a typography experiment he embarked on via *The New York Times*. Something Morris said stuck out because it fits in with what Perro Verlag gets away with: "Everything I do—everything I write about and everything I make movies about—is about the distance between the world and us. We think the world is just given to us, that there's no slack in the system, but there is. Everything I do is about the slack of the system: the difference between reality and our perception of reality."

JC: Yes, that's a great quote. At some point I began to think more about what independent publishing is. I mean, I'd been *doing* independent publishing, but now I was asking myself questions like, Is finding a larger and larger audience for one's work so important? Couldn't small, local editions contribute to change as much as larger print runs? If you are small you can do more with less, certainly. One of the most important things for me is to make the means of production available for people to use. I think local small presses can work with whatever size community they find themselves in to invent ways of doing/making things that call into question just that: "the difference between reality and our perception of reality."

When I find books or zines that have been printed on the quiet and have mysteriously landed on a shelf almost forgotten in a bookshop, I realize here is a real treasure. Millions of copies of shiny pages will never interest me. Because the millions have to represent the status quo.

I love seeing the subtle choices the artist or publisher has made during the production of a publication—design, paper and printing, etc. They are always choices made with deeply personal commitments outside contemporary trends. They are original without trying to look important or to fit in with a certain popular aesthetic.

GP: I wonder what is behind your quest for these treasures—if you had wonderful books in your house when you were growing up?

JC: My parents weren't readers. They saw little reason for my sisters and me to have books at home when there were books in school. My mother disliked having books in the house because, as she said, they collected dust—

GP: —let's say it together: "Books are filthy, dirty things!"

JC: Okay! Books are filthy, dirty things! But I have to say, to counteract the filth, the library at the Catholic grade school I attended had dozens of book on the lives of the saints. I read them over and over. The stories of the young girl martyrs were my favourite.

GP: Mountains of repressed eroticism there! Kind of a landfill of the stuff.

JC: Yep. Mountains and landfills. When I started singing in the church choir our hymn books were written in Gregorian chant notation. This was in 1955. We sang in Latin! My interest in alien alphabets began then. Those square notes, the unreadable sacred text.

A little later I discovered Katy Keene comics and became obsessed with them. You could design dresses for Katy and mail the drawings to the publisher in hopes that your dress design would be chosen for reproduction in the next issue of the comic—or that you might win some kind of prize. I wasn't interested in the prizes but I loved drawing Katy Keene's body over and over again. Drawing the outline of her breasts under the dresses was thrilling! So the eroticism I found in the books of martyrs alongside the powerful turn-on of the Katy Keene comics were the psycho-sexual foundation for my relationship with print culture. I am still always looking for and expecting—and yes, often finding—the same kind of Holy/Sexy charge when I pick up a new book.

GP: Okay, so who is Bucky Fleur? Because I feel like maybe she fits in here, with this gaze on Katy Keene and a pulpy, holy, sexy charge.

JC: Bucky Fleur (sounds on purpose a bit like *Bucky Fuller*) is a character who came to me when I was trying to write about certain forms of failure—paralyzing shame accompanied by a great big pile of ugly rage. I was convinced the work was both repugnant and laughable. I have been hearing Bucky's voice most of my life but she'd been unnamed until around 2001 when Ed Varney invited me to exhibit my work at the Comox Valley Art Gallery. There was to be a zine accompanying the exhibition with the text written by Bucky. That was her first time in print and we'll be forever grateful to Ed for supporting this early publication.

GP: I get that, and so do the alter egos that came out of my own similar tussles. Between us we can fully populate a future zine series.

Bucky was around for the old days in Vancouver at Lucky's Comics and The Regional Assembly of Text. We did so much group drawing then. And remember the Cartoon Wars? That was inspired by you. What other projects did you inspire? Those BBQs and all of us drawing together for hours. And the *Hell Passport* project.

JC: Those certainly were amazing times. You and I first met at one of those drawing parties!

GP: Making exquisite corpses. Talked all night.

JC: Yep. Exquisite talks, fuelled by beer and wine. You know, I saw some drawings one day when I wandered into Lucky's. Owen Plummer was curating these brilliant shows on a three-by-six wall near

the front door. Just wonderful "off the wall" work! I saw Owen's drawings and Julia Feyrer's and Collin Johanson's and Colin Upton's work there too. Then at an opening at the Helen Pitt I met Donato Mancini, James Whitman, and Jeremy Turner. Jeremy had a pocket gallery and Donato had a wallet gallery. They were walking around having the openings of their galleries using the Helen Pitt opening as a venue. They were funny, friendly, welcoming people and I liked them immensely. James and I began drawing together soon after that. Owen and I began hatching installation ideas and book shows. We are pretty much all still working together in some way.

The collaborative drawing parties at Lucky's and the camaraderie around those events was the catalyst for the *Hell Passport* project. At first I thought it might be a small series of maybe ten pamphlets, but it grew to a box set of twenty-four.

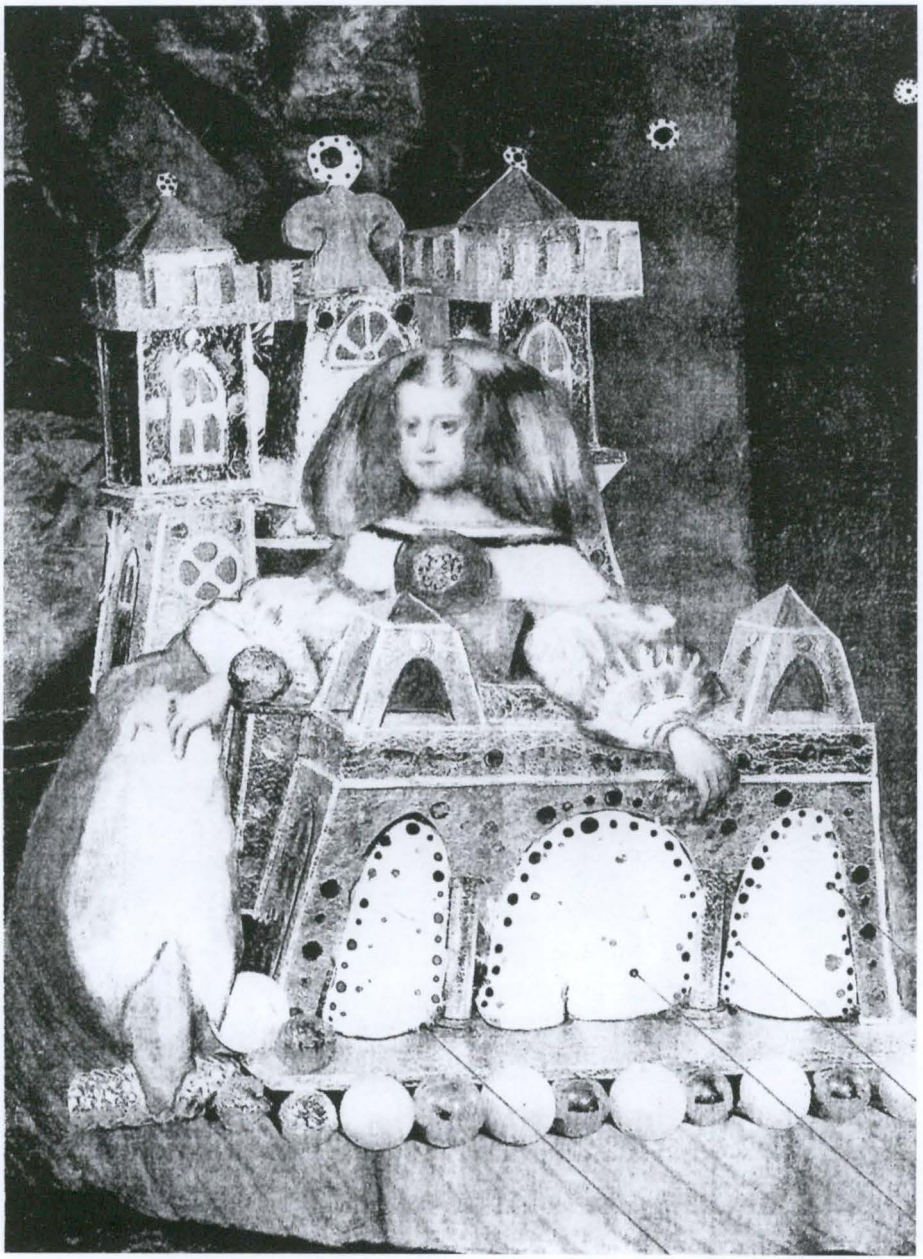
GP: And what about the parties at The Regional Assembly of Text? Those were also a big part of the collective impulse. The *Hell Passport*s were in their library.

JC: Around the same time I met Owen I heard that two Emily Carr students were having an exhibition of artist books and zines in their apartment. The two students were Brandy Fedoruk and Rebecca Dolen. I put one of my early books in their apartment gallery show and met more book people through Brandy and Rebecca who, as it happens, are now in their tenth year of operating The Regional Assembly of Text on Main Street, just a few doors down from Lucky's.

GP: And you are still such great friends. I can't believe it's already been ten years! We celebrated your 60th at the 536 Art Collective around that time, and I know you're turning 70 this month. That's an awesome age. Where do you go from here?

JC: That birthday party! There were at least seven cakes and thousands of balloons. You couldn't move in the room for the balloons. It was a party typical of the over-the-top generosity and nuttiness of 536.

Where I'm going from here: who knows about these things? I've found working with the letterpress to be more and more interesting. It is a huge pleasure. You don't push a start button; you press the paper into the type to make the image. It is a very physical process—which is the pleasure of it, of course. Mixing ink on the glass, inking the type, and pulling a proof is always exciting. It has nothing to do with trying to make a technically perfect reproduction of an image. You are not staring at a computer screen. Reproduction is what I want to move away from. In general I'd say that the idea of "the perfect image" has been a major stumbling block. Once I began printing the work of other artists it was even more of an issue since I didn't want to disappoint with reproductions that weren't perfect. I've spent too much time on cleaning and fine-tuning ink-jet and laser printers as well as my black-and-white photocopier. Sometimes I felt like I was going crazy from the frustration. Now I just want to print pages that expose and perform the mechanics of the letterpress. And of course I'm looking forward to many more collaborative interviews with you, Guinevere, for our forthcoming zine series, *The Interview*! ‡



Jo Cook and James Whitman, *Altered Art Treasures, 1456 to 1960*, 2011, collaborative collage postcards (30 black and white pages), saddle stitched, 19 × 14.5 cm

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Wesley Mulvin, *Altered Faces, Faceless Altars*, 2007, 36 pages including 33 black and white ink drawings

Printed in a signed and numbered edition of 60 copies, two-colour screenprint cover on Fabriano cover stock, with blue endpapers, perfect-bound with black binding tape, 21.5 × 16.5 cm