

## **Cause and Effect, an artists' book by Jessica Peterson**

*Cause and Effect*. Letterpress printed on handmade paper using photopolymer plates. Drum leaf binding structure. Edition of 55. 2009.

*Cause and Effect* is an editioned artists' book about how racial identity is formed through geography and history. It is an autobiographical story about the connections between a race riot in my hometown, my upbringing and my racial awareness. *Cause and Effect* a drum leaf binding in an edition of 55. The content is letterpress printed on handmade paper with photopolymer plates. The imagery in the book consists of printed *trompe-l'oeil*-style newspaper and microfilm clippings, which are reproductions of the sources I learned from.

### **Evolution of concept**

The goal of my thesis project was to create a well printed, conceptually clear and structurally sound artist book about my race development. In my original thesis proposal I wrote:

“The content of the thesis book will investigate the role race has played in my life both culturally and historically. I want to highlight events that have informed my awareness of race. The project’s text will be a combination of historical facts, newspaper excerpts and autobiographical commentary. These texts will be organized along two duelling chronological narratives that will chart significant race-centered events in places I have lived. The narratives will focus on two distinct time periods: the first, 1830-1960 (United States history from slavery through desegregation); the second, 1976-2008 (my lifetime). I hope that the exploration of my own experience will inspire the readers of the book to consider how race has affected their own cultural and historical development...”

My original idea was to retrace the history of slavery and racism in the places I frequented while living in Alabama. Since I moved to the south, I have been disturbed and perplexed by the lack of acknowledgement of race-based events, both the atrocities and the positive occurrences. These histories seem to be undiscussed, but deeply buried in memory. While considering these things about the south, I considered my life, to see if there were any race-based events or defining atrocities in any of the places I lived prior to Alabama. Before moving to Alabama, I lived in New York, Chicago, and Maine... all places that in my mind represented emancipation, equality, and desegregation.

I spoke to many Alabama natives while trying to find the history I was looking for. One of my friends, a southerner, said to me, “You know, people always say that the bad stuff only happened down here in the south, but I know that same kind of stuff happened in the north, it’s just that no one talks about it.” To me, at the time, this was a standard thing that a southerner would say to a northerner like me who was investigating southern history. While part of me dismissed what she was saying, I decided it was important to make absolutely sure my own personal history did not contain direction connections to slavery, or any civil rights events. This is when I learned about the race riot in Rochester.

There wasn’t a single defining moment of discovery. I gradually learned the riot and my connections to it in small snippets of information: civil unrest, a helicopter crash, riots

in New York City and Newark. I researched these snippets until I found sources of information about the Rochester riot which were so large and obvious that I couldn't believe I had never heard about the riot. For example, in 2006 a professor in Rochester made a documentary about the riot that was widely shown on public television.

It wasn't until weeks of research that I was able to admit to myself that there had been a full fledged, violent and racist event in my hometown that I had never heard of before. This made it even more overwhelming when I discovered that my elementary school was founded as a result of the riot; that my parents worked in the riot neighborhood and knew people who had been involved or witnessed the riot. Why hadn't I heard about these things before? Had I heard about them but forgotten?

### **Research and Development**

The story in *Cause and Effect* started as a research project. I researched the riot and Rochester's history in several ways: through online databases and search engines; at the University of Alabama's library; and at the public libraries in New York City (both at the General Research Collection in the main branch on 42<sup>nd</sup> street, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem).

One summer weekend, I travelled to research in the Local History collection of the Rochester Public Library. I had not checked the library hours, and discovered when I got to Rochester that the library was closed on both Saturday and Sunday. As a result, all of the information in *Cause and Effect* was collected in places other than Rochester. The content of the book would have been much different if I had gotten into the Rochester Public Library that weekend, because I would've obtained so much material to work with that I wouldn't have found the connections between the riot and my elementary school. I found the reports and articles which helped me draw these connections because I was exhaustively trying to find anything about the riot in the New York Public Library after my failed trip to Rochester.

Once I came back to Alabama, I interlibrary loaned microfilm of the Rochester newspaper from the University of Rochester, which proved to be a very good source of information. Because the research process was such a huge part of my work on *Cause and Effect*, I included a list of sources next to the colophon.

I wrote the text for *Cause and Effect* over several months. Much of the writing was the result of stream of consciousness journal-style writing exercises, which I did to try to remember my life without censoring myself. Often, frustrated by the limits of memory and my writing ability, I would scribble rhetorical questions to myself. Later, I distilled and then expanded upon these queries, and they became the red questions that appear on the verso of many pages in *Cause and Effect*. I used the questions to depersonalize my very personal narrative, hoping that while people read my answers to the questions, they think about their own answers.

After writing my memories and reactions, I wrote a narrative describing the race riot itself. As a novice writer, switching between all the narrative voices within *Cause and Effect* was a very difficult process. I found writing the nonfiction description of the riot the most difficult.

I wanted to include text from the sources I discovered in my research. I wanted these

sources to speak for themselves, without any editorializing from me. I decided to print these clippings in *trompe-l'oeil* style, so that they would look as if they had been haphazardly slipped into the book, reminiscent of a scrap book. *Trompe-l'oeil* is French phrase which means 'trick of the eye'. The phrase comes from a historical painting style. The clippings are the most successful design element of the content, and serve as both text and image.

## **Design**

I used classic rules of typography as a starting point for the design of the layout. These rules provide guidelines for legibility and attractiveness, and have evolved over the last 500 years of book design and printing. I used measurements based on the golden section (a set of proportions used in the Middle Ages in illuminated manuscripts) to establish the original page and margin sizes. The font faces I chose were both designed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Goudy, a popular transitional font face, is used for the majority of the text and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk, one of the first sans-serif fonts designed, is used for the questions.

The biggest challenge during the design was finding a way to streamline the amount of disparate information and the number of narrative voices within the content. I experimented with using a polygot bible page layout, where several translations of the bible are printed on the same page. I tried using footnotes, and included them in the layout until the very end, when I remembered how much I dislike reading footnotes. I tried justifying all the text, but felt that it looked less conversational and free flowing than the left aligned text. I wanted the layout of the text to be aesthetically pleasing, and attractive to the reader. Ultimately, I kept the layout very simple. I decided that the ability to easily read the content was the most important element of the page design.

## **Binding structure**

*Cause and Effect* is an example of a drum leaf binding structure. I decided to use this structure because I want to be able to print in full spreads without worrying about image breaks caused by pagination. I also wanted to be able to use different types of paper in the same structure.

Timothy Ely popularized the drum leaf binding for book artists based on structural ideas from both Daniel Kelm and Gary Frost (whose version is known as a 'Post-Digital Binding'). I used an article by Melissa Jay Craig, about a workshop she had taken with Timothy Ely, to make my first models. As I was developing the model, I was also working with a team of students and professors on a collaborative book project with artists in Cuba. I suggested that we use the drum leaf structure as the binding for the collaboration, which we ultimately did. As a result, Professor Embree developed her own refined variation of Timothy Ely's binding, which I used for *Cause and Effect*.

Originally, I wanted to justify my use of the drum leaf binding by utilizing its unique structures components. My plan was to use many different kinds of paper and collage techniques on the spreads. As the content of *Cause and Effect* evolved, these types of design ideas were no longer appropriate. The final book could have been another structure, however I like the drum leaf binding as the container for *Cause and Effect* for a number of reasons. The final book is much thicker and heavier than a 16 folio book

would be otherwise. It is also reminiscent of a children's book with the thick cardboard pages, which conceptually supports some of the content. Finally, I really like the lack of visible joint along the spine.

### **Handmade Paper**

There are three types of handmade paper in *Cause and Effect*. Most of the text block is made of paper composed of 90% cotton linter and 10% abaca fiber. I used cotton linters because I wanted a white sheet, and have been pleased with the quality of paper that comes from linters (especially when considering how much time is saved when one's papermaking fibers need minimal preparation). Cotton linters make a thick, nicely textured paper. The one problem with using them is that there is more likely to be chunks of underbeaten fiber, which caused difficulty and frustration when printing. I added abaca because I thought that it would make the paper quality a little more complex than 100% cotton sheet. Ultimately, this addition was too minimal to make much of a difference.

The gray folios are made of a mixture of hemp and cotton. These pages contrast with the white paper, and indicate major shifts in the narrative arch. This type of paper is also used on the cover.

The paper is 90% hemp, with a little cotton mixed in to add body to the sheets. I wanted to create a darker, more textured paper for the end sheets, different than the three gray folios in the text block.

I made the paper in November, over a two week period in the Lost Arch Papermill. The papermill has been fabulously updated with new stainless vats since I made the paper. I used the old wooden vats, which were on their last legs. As a result, there is much debris in my sheets, the majority of which is bits of shellac from the sides of the vat, and small splinters of rotten wood.

One of my goals was to make quality editioned paper, in which all the sheets were the same relative thickness and texture. I made over 400 sheets of paper for *Cause and Effect*. By the end of making this amount of paper, I was excellent at paper editioning: counting my sheets as I pulled them and adding the same amount of pulp after every 4-5 sheets. I established a rhythm to my sheet pulling, which became very familiar after two weeks of papermaking. The last 100 sheets I made were very consistent in thickness, the first 300 less so.

### **Printing**

I printed *Cause and Effect* in Gordo, Alabama, on a Vandercook SP-20, a printing press that belongs to Sarah Bryant, an alumni of the book arts program. I have printed most of my work in Gordo because of the accessibility to quality printing equipment and the supportive, fledging art community started by Glenn House and Kathy Fetters. *Cause and Effect* was printing in approximately 70 runs, over a period of one month.

You never know what will happen in Gordo. I have printed while construction was being performed to the air conditioners above my head; during tornado alerts; while attractive young men watched me print and flirted with me.

One Sunday, we noticed a VW van with New York State tags on the otherwise

empty main street in downtown Gordo. Glenn House went over to the van and invited its occupants into his gallery, to tour the facilities. It turned out that the van owners were a couple from Rochester, New York, who were on a cross country road trip and had just stopped in Gordo, the middle of nowhere, by accident. It took a while to convince Glenn that Rochester was much larger than Gordo, and that the visitors and I were not long lost “kin”. This happened on the day that I was printing the spread containing the banner from the *Democrat and Chronicle*. The couple came into the print shop, and recognized the banner. They didn’t know about the riot either. The coincidence of the incident felt like an omen.