

# THE PUBLISHER AND THE PUBLIC

An upward climb, testing the depth  
No certainty where death lay, where the end  
Drifting across the sky, many stars sailing  
onto two boats – a mirror, lips coming together  
crashing into each other, knowing no frame, no map  
like a catastrophe and out of it a closeness  
that had no name, yet in its whisper gleamed a poem  
– Bianka Rolando, *Darkness*, (translated by Antonia  
Lloyd Jones)

I'm at work in the studio on *Everything Belongs to the Cosmos*, a suite of paintings on paper that will make up a chapel of women's voices. The six central paintings are quite large scale – 3 metres tall by 3.5 metres wide. Each is based on a poem by a Polish poet whom I either asked to write an original poem or who let me use an existing text about an aspect of the cosmos.

Originally begun under the invitation of a regional museum in Poland in 2021, life in Poland, as in the United States, has seen a rising political conservatism and a concomitant curtailment of women's rights. My intention for the suite of paintings is to be a platform to showcase living women writers. I enlisted the help of editor Marcin Orłowski and translator Antonia Lloyd Jones to advise me on contemporary Polish poetry. The Polish writers featured in my paintings span generations and levels of recognition – Anna Adamowicz, Krystyna Dąbrowska, Julia Fiedorczuk, Bianka Rolando, Olga Tokarczuk (winner of the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature), and Urszula Zajączkowska – and are meant to highlight the current writing scene in Poland as each interprets an aspect of the *Cosmos* project.

The first step in my process of making texts both visual and visible, of translating the poets' texts into paintings, is handwriting the words in a child-like cursive on drawing paper. (I've been fascinated to learn that schoolchildren in the United States are no longer taught cursive and as a result can no longer read it.) I photograph my penmanship and straighten out the handwritten words into a line across the sheet using Photoshop. Cleaned up and digitized, these images of handwriting can then be transformed into silkscreens to be printed in large-scale across pieces of paper. I love working between the hand and the bit, the haptic and the digital. I choose a colour or series of colours that are replicated or approximated in inks, the hue changing

by **Alexandra Grant**

slightly after the ink dries. After silk-screening, the painting begins, and I give form and colour and composition to the ideas in the writing – interpreting and translating them in a form that neither the writer who originally conceived them, nor I, the one embodying them in a painting, imagined.

My intention is that all six paintings, wherever they are hung, will create a chapel for reflection and a space for hope, following in the rich tradition of contemplative chapel spaces created by artists as diverse as Henri Matisse, Mark Rothko, Ilise Greenstein and Theaster Gates.

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Just a few weeks ago, I was walking the halls of a museum in Berlin with a curator discussing my work, both as a painter and as a book publisher, and it occurred to me that my paintings were also a form of publishing.

What do I mean by that? I am, in a very conventional sense, a publisher as I collaborate to publish books in support of other artists through XArtists' Books (XAB), which I co-founded in 2017 and help manage creatively to this day. But until very recently I had not seen my paintings, laden with words, as a form of publishing. Rather, I would describe them as platforms for poetry or as opportunities to share with viewers my passion for the work of Wislawa Szymborska, Michael Joyce, Hélène Cixous and many other writers whose words have captured my imagination.

But whether a one-off painting or a mass-printed book, what is publishing but to make something public? The etymology of *publishing*, originating in Latin, comes from *poplicus*, of the people, and *pube*, or adult. (Private, in contrast, comes from the Latin *privus* for single or individual, and *privatus*, withdrawn from public life).

To publish something doesn't necessitate that it will be read or received by others but that the intention is there for the activity to no longer be private or individual.

The digital age has revolutionized publishing. I recently stumbled upon a YouTube video that gleefully announced: "You don't have to be a writer to be an author!" The video was selling a new kind of "writing":

get a ghost-writer to pen a book based upon a topic that is trending in online book sales – and watch the money roll right in! This kind of writing-for-hire as a way of making a living is clearly appealing in a world of dropshipping product fulfilment, of social media success, of buying something on the cheap and selling it for more. The root of author – and authority – is the Proto-Indo-European *aug-* which means to grow or increase, and in this case veers from our traditional sense of an author as a creator or originator to simply that of a promoter. This kind of authorship – of authoring without needing to write – is a desire to be recognized and profit from being seen as an originator while in fact merely promoting.

*Writing*, with Germanic roots, comes from the idea of forming letters by carving, sketching, writing, each a physical activity. Writing – like painting – is from the body, of the body.

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And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great – that is for "great men"; and it's "silly."

– Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Writing, and creativity in general, had been the domain of "great men" and would stay there until women stormed the arena, using words as their weapons.

– Maria Tatar, *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*

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Recent events in the United States have demonstrated the importance of policing the publishing world in order to facilitate control of public discourse by a slim minority. The Supreme Court has repeatedly protected hate speech (published mostly to social media) under the rubric of freedom of speech, while, at the same time, book banning has become the largest movement of public censorship. To defend freedom of speech while embarking on a mission to ban books may appear bewildering, but one way to interpret it is as an attempted erosion of the public sphere.

Hannah Arendt optimistically spoke of the public as being in the streets, outside of institutions, and urged those who were not represented in government to take their voices outside in protest. Judith Butler, by contrast, has written and lectured about the limits of this sense of the public, and more specifically the limited accessibility of the street – an increasingly policed, exclusive, and therefore precarious, place. For Butler, the public sphere is shrinking, whether due to being sold to private organisations or because of increased surveillance mechanisms. If these are material ways of shrinking the public domain, defending the right to use hateful rhetoric and banning books are further – more symbolic – attempts to shrink the possibility of a genuine, democratic public. In line with Butler’s concerns about the diminution of the public sphere, we must also address the question of those excluded from public spaces or those for whom the navigation of public spaces is extremely challenging. In their essay “Sick Woman Theory,” Johanna Hedva wrote that we must expand our idea of the public to include those who are labelled sick or require care, or those who for economic reasons cannot bring their bodies to the street. One way I understand Hedva’s essay is that the private act of writing can become public and political through the authority of publishing.

## THE PRIVATE ACT OF WRITING CAN BECOME PUBLIC AND POLITICAL THROUGH THE AUTHORITY OF PUBLISHING

Publishing follows from the freedom that French philosopher and playwright Hélène Cixous claimed for women in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Publishing makes public that private howl of writing. It is, in many ways, the second writing: the first writing inscribing for the self and the second for the other. I want to argue for the responsibility of publishing, for those of us who have power over the second writing: to remind us that publishers are gatekeepers of what is made public and who is allowed to be in public. This is especially the case when the kinds of physical spaces we associate with a genuine public are being eroded (think of the importance of underground presses/samizdat in

sustaining some sense of a public during the most extreme manifestations of censorship and curtailment of public assembly).

I approach publishing with the conscious question of who is being given space and who is being excluded or not invited to the table. And even if the invitation to publish is there, what other impediments, whether temporal or economic, do marginalized people face in expressing their voices? As a painter who publishes through my paintings, I’m very mindful of how I approach the writers who I ask to work with, and the intention with which I use the specific words I choose. I give room to their voices without taking their author’s place.

(I’m thrilled that Bianka Rolando has let me include and therefore publish her poem *Darkness* here, for the first time, which is concurrently being shaped into a painting in my studio as part of the *Cosmos* project.)

Publishing – in the broadest sense, the choice to make public – is a nearly limitless act that has the potential to build communities, expand minds, and offer new perspectives. If my painting is a private performance of reading and interpreting texts, then exhibiting my works is an act of publication. And in working closely with writers as a painter-publisher, it’s a way of bringing a chorus of support to the world at a time when it is threatened by powerful reactionary forces.

*Alexandra Grant is a Los Angeles- and Berlin-based visual artist whose work explores issues around communication across languages, literary traditions, and cultures. Her work has been exhibited in museums and galleries globally and she is represented by Miles McEnery Gallery in New York and carlier | gebauer in Berlin and Madrid. Grant is the creator of the grantLOVE Project, which has raised funds for arts-based nonprofits. She is also co-founder of independent publisher X Artists’ Books and an advisor to the Futureverse Foundation. Grant received her Master of Fine Arts from the California College of Arts and Crafts and her Bachelor of Arts from Swarthmore College. This essay was written between Los Angeles, California and Allen Island/Waterville, Maine. Website: alexandragrant.com*